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ALLEGIANCE



E. S. R. from St J.
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ALLEGIANCE.

A Novel.

BY

IDA ASHWORTH TAYLOR,

AUTHOR OF 'VENUS'S DOVES,' 'SNOW IN HARVEST.'

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



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TO

U. ASHWORTH TAYLOR.





ALLEGIANCE.

CHAPTER I.

THERE are some places still, even in crowded, overpopulated England, where Nature holds her own—some nooks and corners, not always the farthest from the haunts of men, where she seems to have entrenched herself and to defy the destroyer to enter.

Of course, when we come to look closer, Queen Nature has not kept her sway unaided; there are perhaps agricultural reasons why man, the intruder, should have been content

to leave her in possession ; or perhaps some quiet, unobtrusive devotee at her shrine has gallantly thrown himself into the breach and expended life and fortune in defending her citadel against all comers ; but whatever may be the reason, we are no less thankful for the result.

Down among the Surrey hills, not forty miles from London, with all its hurrying life and ceaseless confusion, such a spot is to be found. As you look at Nortons, partly hidden amongst the great trees that surround it, with walls covered with ivy and Virginian creeper, and roof yellow with the lichen and green with the moss of centuries, you feel at once that this is one of Nature's favoured retreats, that here she has sheltered herself against the modern invader, and that Nortons has stood, as indeed it has, for hundreds of years, just as it stands now, quiet and undisturbed.

It is built half-way up a hill, which rises

some hundreds of feet behind it, and up which steep and narrow pathways, slippery with fir-needles and with roots intersecting their surface like the veins of a hand, lead through pine-woods and undergrowth to the summit where, even on the hot summer days, breezes blow refreshingly over miles of heather and gorse, varied by bogs where the asphodel and sundew grow. In front of the house lie green sloping lawns and flower-beds; and beyond, lanes descend rapidly between tall hedges, white in spring with blackthorn and may, to the wooded and cultivated land below.

Nortons itself is simply an old house, neither castle nor hall, but built solidly, as our forefathers were accustomed to build their habitations, not for themselves alone, as we for the most part are content to build them, having perhaps lost some of our faith in posterity, or, at least, having begun to entertain doubts as to its claims upon our con-

sideration, but for their descendants as well ; and yet, unpretentious as it is, it is not without stories and traditions of its own. There is a room, for instance, which the Carringtons, staunch Jacobites and Conservatives though they had always been, were fond of pointing out as that in which Oliver Cromwell had once slept, and which, in these latter days, is chiefly remarkable for the wild bees which in summer-time find their way cunningly through some hole in the thick stone walls, and buzz about the deep latticed windows until, poor things, they die of their rashness. There are, indeed, endless traditions about the place, for the most part, as such traditions have a way of being, gloomy and disastrous, stories of wilful sin and of doomed innocence.

One wonders sometimes why it is that the tales which cling to those old time-honoured houses are almost invariably those of sadness and death and wrong ; why so few fair and

pleasant, yes, and blameless, lives are recorded, such as must surely have been often passed within them; lives in which men and women did their duty, and lived and died well and nobly, owing grudges to no man, at peace with all mankind, and fearing God and not the Devil, nor those emissaries of his with whose unwelcome presence places long inhabited by men have been so often credited. Let us hope it is because such lives are too common to be recorded, although the contrary is the general belief, and men would have us rather imagine that crime, and robbery, and murder, and revenge are the more frequent events of life; that ever since Adam was banished from Eden, Cains have been slaying their brother Abels all the world over, and guilt has been preying upon innocence.

It is pleasanter to linger over other pictures that those old houses suggest; to think of the generations of happy little children who have

played within their dark walls, and gathered the cowslips and bluebells in the meadows outside, unconscious of any doom, even the universal one of death, which hung over their heads ; to imagine how many happy lovers loitered together under the old trees before any cloud of jealousy or faithlessness or revenge rose to blight their happiness or mar their love. After all, every scene, however sombre, had its counterpart, every night its day ; and even taking for granted that the dark old tales are true, we may be sure that sunshine had come before the storm, if it did not follow it as well. Nothing was so gloomy, so unrelieved, as they would have us believe.

Times are changed now, it may be for the better. There are fewer tragedies ; outwardly, at least, the wheels of life roll more smoothly on their way, less disturbed by jolts or violent shakes ; light and shadow is become less sharply defined, the night and day oftener

mix into twilight. We leave less picturesque scenes for the brush and pencil of posterity ; our lives will probably appear to those who are to follow us somewhat dull and prosaic and undramatic, in comparison with those that went before. Perhaps the reason for the change is to be found in the fact that we have learnt in our older age to take things more quietly ; that, now that we are full-grown, and whether for evil or for good have left our childhood behind us, we have found out that, as we tell the children, there is after all nothing to cry for ; or is it, perhaps, that we have discovered that there is so much that it comes to the same thing, and that we have at any rate learnt to be silent about it ? Men, at all events—at least among what are called the educated classes—no longer stab or shoot their false friends or their unfaithful wives. Perhaps they have an indistinct and for the most part

unformulated conviction, whether right or wrong, that the criminal who is within reach of their vengeance is only the instrument, if not the victim, of another power—of that terrible and inexplicable law of sin and death by which we, like the lower creation, are doomed to prey upon one another, and which, being eternal and immutable, lies beyond the scope of human vengeance; perhaps they think nothing about it, except that it is well to make as little scandal as may be, and not to proclaim their grievances to an over-curious world, which is always only too ready to scoff at the unfortunate, and has a tenacious belief besides that men get what they deserve. But whatever may be the cause, it is certain that life, in the higher state of civilization to which it has nowadays attained, presents far fewer dramatic effects than of old, and that when the thin brick walls of our modern houses fall, though no

fewer hearts may have broken within them, perhaps no fewer crimes been committed—they will not carry to the ground with them the histories and fables which still linger round the homes of our forefathers. Even our ghosts are less substantial, and for the most part take form and shape only to our inward eye, though it may be that they are, for that reason, by no means less terrible or less efficient agents and instruments of punishment.

Within the old houses which yet remain to us as legacies of the past, we move, feeling ourselves to be, like our clothes when compared with the crimson and gold, the velvet and brocade, of their former possessors, a little commonplace and prosaic and sad-coloured ; and yet we are now and then conscious that under its changed garb human nature is everywhere and at all times the same ; that our joys and sorrows, our hatreds and our loves,

and our revenges too, are no less real because they are less dramatically expressed ; and that if our ancestors were to step down from their picture-frames and mingle amongst us once more, though their language might be somewhat different, and their methods of making their opinion felt possibly more open and forcible than our own, yet that they would still at bottom suffer and rejoice, love and hate, much as their descendants do now. After all, it is only the fashion of the clothing, both of body and soul, that varies ; beneath it human nature, good and bad, is everywhere and at all times much the same.

Thoughts like the foregoing used sometimes to pass through Eve Carrington's mind as she sat alone, dreaming or speculating in the way that a solitary life had rendered habitual to her. It was to her that the old house on the hill now belonged, with all its traditions ;

to her, a girl of five-and-twenty, the last representative of the race of Carringtons who had possessed it so long, preserved it so faithfully, and loved it so well.

Eve loved it too. She would have exchanged her home for no other in the world. She loved its grey time-stained walls ; its curious winding passages and dark rooms, its unexpected corners and angles ; she even loved the stories that clung about it, though they had given her childhood many terrors, making her shudder in her bed when the wind whistled round the house and moaned in the wide chimneys, or rustled in the leaves of the thick ivy outside. She had lived at Nortons more than half her life ; ever since, that is, she had come an orphan, at twelve years old, to make her home there with the childless uncle and aunt who had thenceforward supplied to her the place of the parents she had lost, had brought her up as their child, made her their

heiress, and had now passed away, leaving her in possession of the old home.

Eve Carrington's had been a tranquil, serene, and, save for one great exception, an uneventful life. She had passed through phases, lived down enthusiasms, discarded beliefs. She had, like others, possessed idols which had proved clay, and oracles which had become dumb, or, worse still, which she had ceased to consult. She had had ideals which had lost their power to move her, and illusions which had been dispelled, and, above all, she had passed through one momentous experience—an experience which had given the colour to years of her life, and which had threatened at one time to overshadow it all.

At nineteen she had been engaged to be married to Harry Courtney, a sailor, and the younger son of her uncle's oldest friend and neighbour. Both were young, Harry himself only two-and-twenty, and the engagement,

while fully approved and allowed on both sides, was not to be carried out for a year. Before that year of probation was over, young Courtney was dead, struck down by fever on the African coast.

The girl recovered from the blow, but though youth reasserted itself, it was years before the shadow of death had been lifted from her life, and the old wound had ceased to ache. It was, indeed, only lately that she had fully realized that such a change had taken place, and it was not without a curious sense of pain that she had learnt her cure ; that she had become conscious that time had accomplished its work of healing ; that the thought of Harry Courtney had lost its power to move her as of old ; and that the great sorrow which had given the keynote to her existence for so long, had taken its place among the historical facts which fail to thrill us at their touch.

The realization brought with it a strange sense of loss ; a sorrow, no less than a joy, becomes a friendly and familiar presence, which, when withdrawn, leaves us stranded and solitary ; even our griefs are a possession with which we cannot afford lightly to part ; and a healed wound, of which the scar alone remains, a sign and a token, as it were, of the transitory and evanescent nature of all things human, is in some senses sadder than an open one. And yet it was characteristic of Eve Carrington, that though conscious of that half regret, that—so to speak—jealousy for the dead, she had not blinded herself to the fact, nor striven, as some might have done, to galvanize a dead sorrow to life.

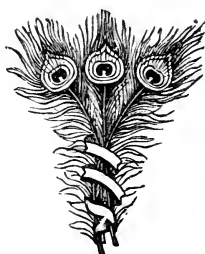
She was not without friends in the neighbourhood which had seen her grow up, and when the death of her aunt had left her solitary, she had received many and kindly offers of sympathy and help. Lady Courtney,

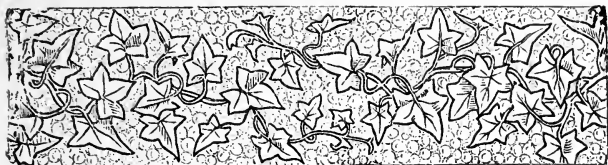
indeed, mother of the present baronet, and of the man whom, had fate been kinder, Eve should have married, had been urgent in her wish that she should make her home, for the present at least, with her ; cherishing, it might be, a hope that the girl whom, since the tragedy that had overshadowed both homes, she had always regarded in the light of a daughter, might yet in time become one. The offer, however, had been gratefully declined, and Eve had remained on at Nortons with the sole companionship of old Miss Duke, a gentle old lady who, once her governess, had returned, on Mrs. Carrington's death, to live with her former pupil.

Eve had never regretted her decision. It is true that, in spite of its beauty, many people might have found Nortons lonely, for there were no near neighbours ; but Eve was one of those to whom solitude becomes by habit rather a friend than an enemy, and though

the year that had elapsed since her aunt's death had been for the most part passed by her without other companionship than that of Miss Duke, she had never been inclined to reverse her determination to continue to live in her old home.

Now, however, for a few months at least, a change was to take place in the tenor of her life, and her solitude was for a time to be interrupted.





CHAPTER II.

IT was two days since Mrs. Ross, her maid, her French *bonne*, and her little boy, had arrived at Nortons —Nortons, most incongruous abode for any of the four, whose very walls, grey and venerable as they were, seemed to protest against the intrusion, but where, notwithstanding, Mrs. Ross meant to remain for the rest of the summer.

She said it was her duty to do so, and so perhaps it was. Nevertheless, those who knew Patricia Ross well were apt to feel somewhat sceptical when she assigned such a reason for her actions, and, if they felt

interest enough in the matter, to look about for another and a more probable cause for them.

In the present case, however, her account of the reasons which had determined her conduct was sufficiently plausible, and she had given it at some length and detail to those of her friends who cared to listen.

‘My half-sister is so lonely,’ she said. ‘Since her aunt died last year she has lived alone, literally alone, except for a companion of about a hundred years old; and even Miss Duke has had to leave her for the present to go and nurse some sick relation. And now that I need no longer be quite such a depressing influence’—Mrs. Ross had been a widow two years, and had by this time discarded her weeds—‘I think I really ought to go and look after the poor child.’

She had accordingly written to Eve, suggesting that she should bring the boy and spend the remaining months of summer—it

was already June—and the early autumn with her ; until, that is, it should be time to take her usual way to the Riviera for the winter.

Miss Carrington had assented to her sister's proposal, if without enthusiasm, yet with sufficient cordiality. Patricia Ross was her only near relation, and though—having married when Eve was still a child, shortly after the latter had come to live at Nortons—there was no real intimacy between them, the prospect of a companion, for a time at least, somewhat nearer her own age than Miss Duke, was not unwelcome.

Mrs. Ross, as she drove the five hilly miles from the station, had felt her heart sink a little. She was not one of those to whom Nature presents many attractions, and the prospect of three months to be spent in the retirement of Nortons caused her a slight sense of dismay, fully shared by her son.

‘It’s a very quiet place, mamma,’ said Master Kit, giving expression to the forebodings his mother was feeling. ‘I hope we shan’t be dull; but I think we should have liked St. Moritz better.’

Kit was experienced, and a traveller, though he was only seven years old, and Mrs. Ross sighed as she attempted to answer reassuringly.

That was, however, two days ago, and she had already begun to adapt herself to circumstances, with the assistance, it is true, of a wholly unlooked-for source of excitement, which, though not altogether of an agreeable nature, was, as Mrs. Ross would have frankly allowed, considerably better than none.

It was of this that she was speaking to Miss Carrington as the two were together in the cool shaded drawing-room the second afternoon after her arrival. It was a large low room, with one window opening into a con-

servatory, whilst the other looked across a lawn and through an avenue of elms to the distant hilly horizon. The furniture, although there was nothing ostentatiously old about it, was solid and substantial and accorded well with the thick walls and dark panelling of the room.

‘I have a confession to make to you, Eve,’ Mrs. Ross said, throwing down the book she had been pretending to read. She had a clear sweet voice, with a slightly foreign pronunciation, due to her long residence abroad, and a manner which, when she pleased, was very attractive. She was pretty, too, in a bright piquante way, with fair hair elaborately arranged, hazel eyes, and small delicate features.

Eve turned as she spoke. She had been standing at the window looking absently out, a slight figure a little above the average height, with dark hair cut in a straight line

across her forehead, and lying heavy and uncurled over level brows and grave, dark-blue, black-lashed eyes.

She had been thinking, just before her sister's voice interrupted her, that it was the anniversary of the day, five years ago, when the tidings of Harry Courtney's death had been brought to her ; remembering also, again with that vague regret stirring within her, that till that moment she had forgotten it. She had been standing at that very window when his brother had come across the grass with the terrible news written on his face. For years the scene in all its details had remained photographed on her memory, accompanied by her own sudden horror of fear—the avenue of elm-trees rustling and whispering in the hot summer breeze just as they were doing now, the blazing flower-beds, the flickering lights—everything was exactly as it had been that day : it seemed almost as if she

must once more see Sir Cyril advancing across the lawn, bringing the message which had blasted her hopes. Her heart contracted with pain, which was yet, as she involuntarily recognised, the pain of a remembered and not a living sorrow.

Her sister's voice disturbed her reflections.

‘I have a confession to make,’ she repeated. ‘Come and listen to it, Eve. I had not, it is true, contemplated it, but circumstances have made it necessary.’

Eve had turned, rousing herself from her own private meditations ; and dismissing, for the present, her recollections, she came to sit down near her sister, looking at her inquiringly.

‘What is it?’ she asked, still somewhat absent.

‘What is it? It is the ghost of a folly which now seems to belong to the dark ages, though, counting by months and weeks, it is

not, after all, so very long since it took place—I always,' parenthetically, 'talk of follies taking place; it makes them more impersonal—and which has suddenly started to life again. Did you ever hear of Gilbert Verschoyle?'

'The son of the man who died last month, who lived some miles the other side of the Courtneys? Yes, I remember the name. Did he not do something discreditable, which prevented his father having him at home?'

'Yes—that is the man,' replied Mrs. Ross gloomily. 'I wish I had happened to hear his history sooner.'

'Then you know him?' asked Eve.

Mrs. Ross shrugged her shoulders.

'I know him—yes,' she answered.

'Do you know him well?' asked Eve, her curiosity, though it was a quality which was not strong in her, roused by her sister's manner.

'I *knew* him very well,' answered the latter,

with some emphasis. ‘Come, Eve, I may as well tell you the truth—it is no use beating about the bush. Six months ago I promised to marry Mr. Gilbert Verschoyle.’

There was a pause. Miss Carrington’s countenance had taken an expression of slight dismay. She was used to form independent judgments, and was less than most women influenced by the opinions of the world and the dictates and laws of conventional society; but still Mr. Verschoyle’s reputation in the county, as she now began to remember more clearly, was not such as to point him out as a desirable husband or brother-in-law.

‘You are engaged to him?’ she said.

‘No, no—not now. I *was* engaged to him. Listen, Eve; I will tell you the whole story. Of course I was to blame—at least I suppose I ought to have been more careful, but what would you have? It is all the fault of the theories upon which we are brought up, and

which we are so accustomed to take for granted that we accept them as a matter of course.' 'I really believe'—with asperity—'the worldly maxims at which it is the fashion to throw so much dirt—from Locksley Hall downwards—have not done one-tenth of the damage that the unworldly ones have, against which nobody dares say a word.'

Mrs. Ross had a sort of eloquence, or at least possessed a command of language of her own, and Eve was accustomed to listen to her without much interruption, being herself naturally silent ; but as her sister paused for breath she put in a word, recalling her to the subject in hand.

'Apropos of what ?' she said quietly.

'Well, you are told you have a heart—everyone has, therefore you have. That is the process of reasoning—I forget what it is called. And you take the fact for granted, and act accordingly. *I did.*'

‘That is to say——’

‘That is to say, I engaged myself to Gilbert Verschoyle. I knew all along that it was not a good marriage, but he was fond of me, and I really thought I liked him ; and—and it had been so dull for the last year or more,’ pursued Mrs. Ross frankly. ‘Of course I was very sorry when poor Robert died ; but after all I was so young, scarcely twenty-six, when it happened, and one can’t go on mourning all one’s life long.’ Eve turned away ; her sister’s words sounded like a crude and heartless caricature of what time had taught *her*. ‘I had seen no one and done nothing for months, and then one day—it happened abroad, you know—Kit’s pony ran away with him, and he really might have been killed if Mr. Verschoyle hadn’t been there. I couldn’t do less than be civil after that, and somehow I saw a good deal of him. I had never heard a hint of his previous career, and I could see he was a gentleman.’

Mrs. Ross paused, out of breath ; but Eve made no comment, and after a minute her sister went on :

‘ Well, we were engaged. It was not much more than a year after Robert’s death, and I stipulated that it should be kept secret for six months—nobody was to hear of it. I knew very few people at Nice, where it all took place, and he didn’t seem to know anybody either. And then one day—I had casually mentioned him in a letter to England just after the child’s accident, before there was anything between us—I got a letter of kindly warning. I was to take care not to have much to do with him ; he had been mixed up in some shameful money transactions at Oxford—I don’t know quite what—and was a disgraced man.’

‘ I remember now,’ said Eve. ‘ He was said to have forged his father’s name to a cheque. Mr. Verschoyle paid the money, but I believe he never had him at home afterwards.’

‘ Exactly—nobody received him—so my informant said ; he was, as I told you, a disgraced man. It was a pleasant account to get, wasn’t it, of the man one had promised to marry?’

‘ It was,’ said Eve. ‘ What did you do? tell him the story and ask him if it was true?’

‘ My dear Eve, what do you take me for? To insult a man to his face—the man you are engaged to—by asking him if it was true he was a felon who had happened to escape conviction! I should have died of it!’

‘ Ah, I see,’ said the girl comprehendingly. ‘ You knew it couldn’t be true—you didn’t believe it?’

‘ Yes, I did ; at least’—candidly—‘ I don’t think I ever thought much about it. It was clear the world believed him to be guilty, and that was the main point.’ Patricia Ross was

always too modest to set her opinion against that of the world; she deferred to its judgments, its canonizations, its excommunications, as a Catholic does to those of the Church. 'What is the good of innocence if it can't prove itself?'

'Poor Innocence!' said Eve softly.

Mrs. Ross laughed.

'You needn't pity her,' she said. 'Don't you know she has what we are all supposed to consider most worth having—besides sometimes getting what we do not dare aspire to—martyrdom.'

'You are growing discursive,' observed Eve. 'What course did you take?'

Mrs. Ross reflected.

'One I have never ceased to regret. I broke off my engagement.'

'And now you are sorry for it?' asked Eve quickly.

'Not sorry I broke it off—that was inevit-

able. And besides—I told you before I had been misled by the theories in which one is brought up—I had imagined myself to have lost my heart to him, whereas I now know I hadn't any heart to lose. I found it out afterwards, but only after a most unpleasant series of mistakes, into which, if I had been left alone, I should never have fallen. I liked him well enough—he was good-looking and clever, to a certain extent—but I never really cared for him. He had a vile temper, too, and I had begun to find it out. No, what I am sorry for is that I didn't give the right reason.'

'What reason did you give?'

'I put it upon money. I wish I had spoken the truth. I can't think why I don't. I have so often found it would have answered better in the end, and made up my mind to try it for the future. But I can't—*c'est plus fort que moi!*' throwing out her hands with a

deprecating gesture. 'On the very next occasion I lie as gaily as ever.'

'You mean you gave money as your reason for breaking off the engagement?' asked Eve, paying no attention to Mrs. Ross's digression.

'Yes; I told him he was too poor. Of course he *was* poor then—he had no profession, and only the few hundreds a year his father allowed him, so it was a plausible excuse ready to hand; but I wish I had told him the truth.'

'And you didn't care for him?' said Eve absently.

'My dear Eve, I said just now I didn't. I liked him quite well enough to have married him, if things had been straight. As to the rest, I have told you my theory—I have an intellectual belief in strong emotions, but my faith belongs to the brain, not to the heart.'

'And what are the "circumstances" which you said just now made it necessary for you

to tell me about it?' asked Eve, after a pause.

'I was coming to that. The fact is, I had a letter from him—from Gilbert—this morning, telling me that by his father's death he has inherited the property; and, the bar of poverty being thus removed, he suggests that our engagement should be renewed.'

'Then the estate was entailed?'

'No, that is the extraordinary thing; it was not. It really seems as if Providence had interfered to protect Mr. Gilbert Verschoyle, unlikely as it would seem that it should take an interest in his affairs. His father apparently died quite suddenly, without having altered the will he made years ago, before there was any quarrel, so that everything comes to Gilbert as it would have done naturally under other circumstances. He seems astonished at it himself—you see he never expected to inherit. I must

say,' added Patricia approvingly, 'that his exposition of the condition of affairs is most business-like.'

'And what do you mean to answer?' asked Eve.

'That is just my difficulty—how to put what I have to say. As to my meaning, I am clear enough; but I confess that the question how to express it puzzles me. I will not marry him. I have enough money of my own; and the other objection—the real one—remains just what it was. I love the world and society far too well to cut myself off from them by marrying a man of whom they have decided to decline the acquaintance.'

'I see,' said Eve. 'Yes—then what shall you say?'

'What do you advise? it is just upon that point that I wanted to consult you.'

'Why not—the truth?' asked Eve slowly.

Mrs. Ross made an impatient movement.

‘I have told you that is out of the question,’ she said. ‘I will not insult him.’

‘You will not insult him,’ repeated Eve. ‘Then I am afraid I cannot help you.’

She was thinking that in thought and in act Mrs. Ross did not object to insulting the man she was to have married—it was only in word that she found it impossible. There was a pause, and then Patricia spoke again.

‘I suppose I must write an ambiguous letter—tell him I have come to the conclusion that we are not suited to make one another happy, and so forth. It is quite true. Luckily he writes from London, so that there is no chance of meeting him in this neighbourhood; and he does not know where I am—his letter has followed me from abroad. Well, I may as well get it done. Come, Eve, tell me you think I am right.’

Eve looked her sister steadily over. She was fond of her, she even in a certain way

admired her ; but yet at this moment she felt something not unlike contempt for the nature that lay revealed, though such contempt was not a sentiment which was accustomed to find a place in her mind.

‘ Yes, I think you are right,’ she answered after that momentary survey. ‘ At any rate, as you have been wise enough to range yourself on the side of the majority you are safe, whatever happens. It is only when we join the minority that a mistake is fatal.’

She rose and passed out through the open window. Patricia looked after her with a laugh in which there was no touch of offence, though, shrewd as she was, she had not failed to read her sister’s meaning with sufficient accuracy.

‘ She is very young still,’ she said to herself indulgently. ‘ I knew more of the world at fifteen than she does at five-and-twenty. I know, though she does not say so, that she would have liked me better if I had held to

Gilbert in spite of his damaged reputation and doubtful character—if, in fact, I had been content to think “all for love and the world well lost.” But she will find out in time—though she takes so long about it—that the beaten paths are best. I have tried them both.’

It was true; but Mrs. Ross forgot to reflect that the tracks which in her somewhat chequered career she had more than once been tempted to follow had all tended in one direction, whilst those of which Eve Carrington dreamed led in quite another.

Perhaps, however, there was truth in what she said. The beaten paths at any rate are the smoothest, and those who tread them, diverging neither to the right nor to the left, not only escape the thorns and briars and pitfalls that lie alike on either side, but also avoid the precipices over which those who climb higher are apt to fall.



CHAPTER III.

ONE afternoon, some ten days after that upon which Mrs. Ross had made her confession—not, perhaps, an altogether complete one—the subject of it was arriving at the home he had quitted upwards of eleven years ago, and had never since revisited.

He had not announced his coming beforehand, and there were no preparations to greet the arrival of the heir. No conveyance was to be had at the small country station where he got out, nor was there anyone to meet and welcome, or even recognise him. The station-master was a stranger, and only an old porter

looked curiously after the new-comer as he walked quickly away, leaving his portmanteau to be called for.

‘That’ll be young Verschoyle, Bill,’ he said, addressing a comrade, after having first taken the precaution of verifying his conjectures by a survey of the initials upon the traveller’s luggage. ‘I mind him well enough, though he’s changed since he come here last. He were quite a young chap then ; but there’s no doubt that’ll be him.’

‘Then it’ll be a rare bad one,’ returned Bill severely. ‘When a man’s own father won’t have nothing to do with him, we knows what to think.’

And his companion endorsed the opinion with a shake of the head.

The subject of their remarks was meanwhile walking away at a swinging pace. He was a man of between thirty and thirty-five, looking older than his age ; with close-cut black hair

waving slightly ; a tall well-built figure ; a brown thin face, and dark-grey eyes under marked black eyebrows. It was a handsome face, though somewhat worn and lined ; and yet not a pleasant one, and it bore out Mrs. Ross's assertion that his temper was bad. The world had, in fact, gone ill with him, and the consciousness of it was apparent in every line of his well-cut mouth, and in the expression of the eyes which were just now taking note of the familiar landmarks with an interest in which no touch of any softening sentiment mixed, though he was visiting the home of his boyhood—the only home, in fact, that he had ever known.

Eleven years!—he had counted them up—it was eleven years since he had last traversed that road. Two months later the event had taken place which had left him disgraced for life in the eyes of the world, and had shut the doors of his father's house upon him, casting him

forth, friendless and alone, to face his disgrace as he might, and make what he could of his life. He *had* faced it, with a proud and dogged endurance which, if it was not courage, both counterfeited it and did its best to supply its place; but the struggle, none the less because he had to a certain extent conquered in it, had left him with every trait of his character hardened and embittered, and with its history written in each line of his face; with the character and the face of a man who for eleven years—perhaps the most important years of his life—had been standing on the defensive, with his hand at all times ready to return a blow, till the attitude had become habitual; who had been ever ready to detect an insult, and prompt to avenge a slight, and upon whom few counteracting influences had chanced to fall.

His childhood had been unloved, and his boyhood neglected. The first Mrs. Verschoyle

had died when her only child was in blouses ; his father, a cold, severe, upright man, with a keen and uncompromising sense of honour and an inordinate family pride, had never cared for the boy ; and his stepmother had treated him with open dislike. No tender memories lingered round the paths which, after so long, he was treading ; yet recollections of one sort or another crowded upon him as he walked along the familiar road—so curiously more familiar than all those with which he had been acquainted since.

It was at that white gate that his pony had shied and thrown him. He remembered, with the strange vividness belonging to childish impressions, his father's look as he stood before him—a muddy little figure, bruised, shaken, and even tearful—and the cold contempt with which his reluctance to mount again had been visited ; he recalled his own mingled fear and resentment when he had

been forced to do so. The pony was unsafe—he knew it, the groom knew it, everybody knew it—but his father had called him a coward. He remembered his father's second marriage when he was a lad of sixteen, and the undisguised dislike his stepmother had from the first entertained for him ; as fully and with equal openness reciprocated by himself. She, poor thing, was dead now, and her only child, Dorothy, whom he had not seen since she was four years old, was, as he knew, left, by a strange oversight, to his own guardianship. She was at home now, as he thought, with a sense of distaste.

No, he had no reason to love the place ; and yet he had come to it meaning to stay, to live on and make his home there. He anticipated no welcome in the neighbourhood. He was fully aware that if there was one place more than another where his reputation and his ruined character would tell against him, it was among

his father's friends ; and yet he had decided, with the same dogged determination with which he had met all the other consequences of his disgrace, there to brave the matter out. He was not even conscious of any particular shrinking from what to many men would have been an unbearable ordeal. To a great extent he was hardened and steeled against the opinion of the world. It was impossible that the years which had gone by should not have left him thus ; for shame, like sorrow, loses its edge, and the one is no more, what it is so often called, lifelong, than the other, although the effects of both remain, for good or for evil, stamped upon the character. Habit—stronger than either courage or principle—had rendered him in great measure callous to disapproval or blame, and it was only when he was touched at some unaccustomed point that the blow still had power to make him wince, and force him to confess

with self-contempt that, habituated though he had been to insult and slight, he was not yet invulnerable. Over such an intimation he was even now brooding, with his face dark and his mouth hard, as he approached his destination. It was, this time, Patricia's letter which had found its way through the joints of his harness, and of which the recollection, though it was now ten days since he had received it, still rankled.

Cautiously worded and considerably expressed as it had been—Patricia was an adept at letter-writing—he had read between the lines, and had detected, quick as he had become at such discoveries, the real cause of her refusal to renew their engagement ; and in her present rejection he had read no less the reason of her former one. It did not, it is true, come to him with any great surprise. He had suspected something of the kind before, and perhaps it had been, in part at

least, a morbid curiosity and desire to prove his suspicion correct which had prompted his present proposal. At all events, whether such had been the case or not, her answer had confirmed him in his conviction. He knew her well enough to be sure that she was not a woman likely to refuse what he had now to offer, had she no other reason for doing so than those she alleged. He judged her justly, impartially, and with sufficient accuracy. He had never, indeed, with regard to Patricia, been blinded by passion ; although, liking her, he had allowed himself to be carried away by a transient, and even at the time half contemptuous, admiration for her shallow cleverness and bright pleasant ways. For the rest, she had crossed his path when life had little that was pleasant belonging to it ; and the days when he had believed—with that curious half belief which voluntarily and with open eyes lends itself to deception—in

her affection, had been among the least sombre ones of his latter years, although the happiness which belonged to them had not been of an ideal or elevating character.

It was, perhaps, characteristic of the terms upon which they stood, and of his estimation of the nature and force of her affection, that he had kept silence to her concerning the blot which stained the name he had offered her, and which she had accepted. It had not so much as occurred to him to do otherwise. She would learn the truth soon enough: he had asked no more confidence from her than he was prepared to give. Had there been any episode in her life upon which she might think it well to drop a veil, he knew her well enough to feel sure that she would do so; and for the rest, if he could steal a march upon the world and upon society—the world and the society to which she belonged, and from which he was, though she did not know it, an outcast

—all was fair in the war which they had waged upon him. So he told himself upon the rare occasions on which conscience had suggested to him a scruple.

When the end had come he had not been, however, heart-broken—Patricia was not the kind of woman for whom men break their hearts—and he had acquiesced with sufficient facility in the course she had taken, and in the reasons she had assigned for it, recognising their value and not even resenting her change of purpose. He had, to a certain extent and to a modified degree, been sensible of disappointment, but he had made no complaint. It was not his custom to complain of the world and its ways. If he had a quarrel with it, he kept it to himself. His cynicism, if it existed, was always a silent one—perhaps it was too real to be garrulous, for genuine cynicism is rarely overt; if the world has been really unkind, and thus has given us a

thoroughly bad opinion of it, we are apt to keep it to ourselves, having a lurking suspicion that it may have reason on its side, and being therefore unwilling to draw attention to the quarrel. Of late, however, as has been said, a suspicion had forced itself upon him that the reason she had alleged for the annulling of their engagement had not been the real one, and since he had received her last letter his suspicion had been confirmed. It is true that she had not now, any more than on the former occasion, hinted at the truth; her whole letter was indeed an elaborate attempt to conceal it, and it was this that had chiefly roused his anger. Had she been candid he would have acquiesced, not perhaps without bitterness, but without remonstrance or reproach, in her decision. But as it was, he swore to himself that he would force the truth from her; that—with a correct perception that this was the only punishment he had it in his

power to inflict—she should be forced to tell the man she had professed to love well enough to marry him that she had thrown him over, not because of the poverty she had once assigned as her excuse, nor because of the incompatibility of temper and difference of disposition which she now gave as her determining reasons, but because the world had turned its back upon him and made him an outcast. For once he would force the truth from her.

His meditations, emphasizing the disagreeable expression on his face, had reached this point as he walked up to his own door and, after a moment's hesitation, rang the bell.

‘Is Miss Verschoyle at home? Will you tell her I am here? I am Mr. Verschoyle,’ he said to the man who appeared; conscious of a dim sense of amusement at having thus to introduce himself and at the servant’s face of surprise, which, however, with the instinct

of a well-bred footman, he instantly succeeded in suppressing.

‘Certainly, sir. Miss Dorothy is in the schoolroom. I will inform her that you are here.’

Gilbert passed the man and went into the library. It had the desolate, uncomfortable look of an unused room, though it was well and luxuriously furnished. Verschoyle wondered, as he stood before the empty fireplace looking round him, whether he should ever feel at home there, anything but an unwelcome and intrusive interloper. It almost seemed to him as if his father’s ghost must rise, to turn him out of the inheritance into which by such a strange oversight or accident—it could be nothing else—he had been allowed to enter.

There was his father’s leathern chair, the table where he used to write, his books. The room was chiefly associated in his mind with

parental reprimands and rebukes ; till now, he never recollected entering it voluntarily or of his own accord. With strange accuracy he recalled the last occasion upon which he had stood there—eleven years ago—and his parting with his father. It had made little enough impression upon him at the time ; the interview had been chiefly interesting, and that in a somewhat unpleasant manner, from a financial point of view, and he had been sensible of some relief when it was over, and he had been able to make good his escape.

Yet now he remembered it clearly enough. It had been the last time he had seen Mr. Verschoyle till, hastily summoned to the hotel in London where he had been overtaken by his sudden and fatal attack of paralysis, he had arrived too late to find him alive. He wondered, glancing at the ink and pens still on the table, whether it had been there that the letter had been written which, two months

later, had contained his sentence of banishment and outlawry.

Standing there in his father's house, he accused him in silence of the ruin of his life. What had he ever given him that was worth having? Other men had tender recollections clinging round their homes, but what had he?—only the memory of neglect and dislike, scarcely veiled or concealed; and, lastly, the brand of an implacable resentment, which had shut him out for ever from forgiveness, and had cast him upon the world at twenty-two without a friend.

He wondered as he stood waiting for his sister, though he was not given to indulge in such speculations, whether anyone more solitary than himself existed. He had not a single close friend. He had, once for all, when he quitted Oxford, broken with those who belonged to the past—necessity and pride alike demanded it—and he had not accepted those

who would have been since ready enough to admit him into their circle, no question asked. He stood absolutely and entirely alone. He was interrupted in his reflections.

The door had opened, and a little girl was advancing towards him in a leisurely manner. She was small and childish in appearance, with pale flaxen hair neatly smoothed away behind her ears, and hanging in a thick plait behind ; light-blue eyes and straight features ; and was dressed in deep mourning, with a brown-holland apron over her black frock. What might be wanting, however, in dignity in her appearance was amply made up for by her manner, which, for its calm self-possession, would have done credit, under the circumstances, to a woman of twice her age. No faintest shadow in voice or manner indicated that she was greeting her only brother after an absence of eleven years ; no trace of shyness or embar-

rassment sent the colour to her pale little face.

‘I am sorry to have kept you waiting,’ she observed, advancing and offering her hand, which Gilbert took with a sense of relief that he was evidently not expected to give her a more brotherly greeting. Sentiment, as has been observed, had little to do with his home associations, and certainly less than all with his stepmother’s child. ‘If you had let me know when to expect you, the carriage should have met you.’ Dorothy’s tone was slightly disapproving.

‘It did not matter at all, thanks,’ he returned. ‘I did not feel sure I should find you at home. Have you been here ever since—since last month?’

‘Since papa died, you mean? that was six weeks ago,’ corrected Miss Verschoyle, mentioning the event with none of her brother’s involuntary hesitation, and quite without the

emotion the fear of which had given rise to it.

‘No ; I went to Mace Court—Lady Courtney’s—for a week. But I have been at home a fortnight now. Miss Hare did not wish my lessons to have any further interruption.’

‘I see,’ said Gilbert, rather absently. ‘You were not at the funeral, Dorothy.’

Mr. Verschoyle had been buried, in accordance with his own wish, at a small property he possessed at some distance, where his father and grandfather rested.

‘No,’ returned the child. ‘Miss Hare thought it was better not.’

Gilbert changed the subject.

‘Miss Hare ? Is that the lady who conducts your education ?’ he inquired. ‘How old are you, Dorothy ? fourteen, is it not ? I remember you were a little thing in white frocks when I saw you last’—a plain, spoilt little child, he added mentally.

‘I shall be fifteen next month,’ answered

Dorothy sedately, ignoring his allusion to their last meeting, which indeed appeared to her most injudicious under the circumstances. Dorothy was well acquainted with the family scandal. She was one of the children—not so rare as might be wished, and perhaps becoming daily less so—who appear to arrive at a knowledge of the world as if by instinct; and in this special case no care had been taken to keep her in ignorance of her brother's disgrace. To her, as to all his father's friends, to all the neighbours, to the parson who had regretted the advent of such a parishioner, to the very footman who had opened his own door to him, he stood in the position of a disgraced man; and Dorothy Verschoyle, conventional and worldly to the core of her small heart, was the last person to forget or forgive it. It had, it is true, been clearly necessary under the circumstances that she should outwardly, at least, condone her brother's offence; but she

disapproved of any reference to the subject, or to what it had entailed, as both wanting in good taste and as denoting an insufficient sense on his part of its enormity. Gilbert was acutely conscious—half amused, half angry—of the meaning of the child's manner.

‘Yes,’ he went on carelessly. ‘Eleven years is a long time, isn't it, Dorothy? Can you remember what happened eleven years ago?’

‘Not very well. I——’

‘Well, never mind; some things are better forgotten, aren't they? All things considered, perhaps, a good memory is not an altogether unmixed good;’ he was touching, irritated by the consciousness of the child's manner, on the subject he knew she wished to ignore. ‘Perhaps you will learn that in time, like other things—besides those Miss Hare teaches you.’

When, half an hour later, she left him to

return to her lessons, he shrugged his shoulders with a half-laugh, which yet was not without its bitterness. Little Dorothy had once more held up to him the mirror of the world.

‘And to-morrow,’ he said to himself, ‘to-morrow Mrs. Ross shall, for once, speak the truth.’

He was again interrupted. The door had opened, and an old man, his father’s valet, who had been in his service ever since Gilbert could remember, entered. Verschoyle held out his hand to him with careless kindness.

‘Ah, how are you, Jenkinson?’ he said.

He had last seen the man at the funeral. He had been with Mr. Verschoyle when he had been seized in London with the fatal illness, and it had indeed been he who, on his own responsibility, and with fear and trembling, had despatched the telegram which summoned

Gilbert to his deathbed. He now came forward with timid eagerness. He was a frail old man, with thin grey hair and a worn nervous face.

‘I am glad to see you home, sir,’ he said, with a voice that shook a little as he took his master’s hand. ‘The house has never been the same since you left it.’

Gilbert was both taken by surprise and touched. He, for his part, in the years that had elapsed since he was banished from home, had almost forgotten Jenkinson, and the timid, unobtrusive affection he had always shown him as a boy. But though he was not unmoved by this, the first word of welcome he had received, he had all a man’s dislike of anything approaching to a scene, or to any display of emotion.

‘I am sure it is very good of you to say so,’ he said. ‘I am glad to find you still here.’

He shook the old man's hand kindly before he turned away. He would have been still more touched and surprised if he had known that Jenkinson's eyes were full of tears as he left the room.

'At least he has got his own,' he said to himself, as he went along in his hesitating, uncertain way towards the back regions. 'In spite of all them lawyers.'





CHAPTER IV.

NEARLY a fortnight had elapsed since Patricia Ross had received and answered Verschoyle's letter ; and having heard no more from him, she had decided that he had made up his mind to regard her refusal to renew the terms upon which they had once stood as final, and to accept it without further remonstrance.

She was relieved on the whole, and though perhaps not without a slight sense of pique, she could not but allow that, especially in a neighbourhood where he and his affairs were so well known and likely to be so freely canvassed, it was well that her past connec-

tion with him should remain unguessed. It was of this that she was speaking to her sister one afternoon as they were returning from their drive about five o'clock.

‘My letter has evidently put an effectual end to the affair,’ she was saying. ‘I was decided enough, though I was civil—extremely civil. Civility is the only thing that does carry conviction; people always think it is temper if you are not. I must say I am relieved that it should all be decided before he comes down to this part of the country—if he does come, that is, which I suppose is doubtful under the circumstances. Leaving myself out of the question’—it may be mentioned that this was a figure of speech of the wildest description; Mrs. Ross never had been known, on any occasion whatever, to leave herself out of the question—‘leaving myself out of the question, I should have been very sorry to have been the means of

bringing you into contact with Mr. Verschoyle. I shudder to think of Sir Cyril's feelings, should he have discovered that I had done so.'

She laughed maliciously as she spoke.

'Sir Cyril?' repeated Eve with rather cold inquiry.

'You do not mean to deny that he has a special interest in the matter? How long are you going to keep him waiting, Eve?'

The girl turned a little away. It was the first time that the subject had been openly broached between them, yet she knew, nor would she deny her knowledge of it, that Sir Cyril Courtney *was* waiting; and she also knew—but this she had only quite lately admitted even to herself—that it was possible he might not wait in vain. Nothing could have made her realize so clearly as this consciousness the deadness of the past. She would have rejoiced, had it been in her power

to answer, as she would have done a year ago, that it was impossible, out of the question—to have resented the very suggestion as an insult, both to her living, and to Harry dead. But as it was, she knew, with the inexorable truthfulness that was part of her character, that the reason which so short a time ago would have seemed all-sufficient was gone—vanished; and in its absence it appeared likely that there would be none other of sufficient strength to withstand much longer Sir Cyril's own gentle, though hitherto only half-expressed, persistence and the wishes of his mother, aided and abetted as they were by the strong affection she bore them both. Perhaps, as her sister spoke, her most prominent feeling was regret that she had not been married to Harry Courtney, since such an arrangement would have enabled her to retain his brother as her own without danger of future complications. She

could hardly have loved Cyril more had he been her brother indeed—he was the closest friend the world held for her—but perhaps that very love made her the less willing to contemplate a change in the terms upon which they stood. Had she cared for him less, less would have been at stake. Her sister had been watching her curiously, and now spoke again.

‘How long are you going to keep him waiting, Eve?’ she persisted.

‘I do not know,’ said the girl slowly. It was a confession, and she knew it.

They had turned in some minutes before at the lodge-gates, and were drawing up at the door. Kit, who was kneeling upon the step of the porch, engaged in spinning a top of a particularly attractive description, rose at their approach, and desisted from his occupation, hailing their arrival with the alacrity of one who has news of interest which he is

ready and anxious to impart. His voice reached them almost before the carriage stopped.

‘The man is here what caught Tommy when he runned away,’ he cried. Kit’s conversation, though fluent, and marked with considerable acuteness, was not characterized by grammatical correctness. ‘He is waiting in the drawing-room.’

‘Mr. Verschoyle!’ exclaimed his mother, with undisguised consternation. ‘Are you sure it is he, Kit? When did he come?’

‘About half an hour ago, ma’am,’ said the butler, coming forward. ‘I informed him that you and Miss Carrington were out driving; but he said that he had come upon business, and would wait.’ Jones’s tone was severe and disapproving to the last degree.

‘He is in the drawing-room?’ asked Mrs. Ross, with an effort at disguising her dismay. ‘There, Eve!’ she said in an undertone, as

the man retired. 'That comes of congratulating one's self too soon. What is to be done now? What on earth can have brought him here? I am sure my letter was explicit enough. What shall I do?'

'I suppose you can't refuse to see him,' returned the girl. 'Delay, at all events, will do no good. You had better go in at once.'

'I suppose I must. But promise not to leave us for long alone—one quarter of an hour's *tête-à-tête* is all I will give him. Yes, I know I said just now I would not be the means of introducing you, but I can't help it. Sir Cyril notwithstanding, you must promise me to come and interrupt us.'

Eve gave the required pledge, though reluctantly. She had a languid distaste to the whole affair, and disliked the idea of being mixed up in it, even to the extent of assisting at the parting interview of her sister with the man she had thrown over. It was evident,

however, that Mrs. Ross would not let her refuse without more difficulty than the matter was worth, and she accordingly resigned herself to the inevitable.

When Patricia had left her, she sat down on the doorstep, idly watching her little nephew and listening to his disjointed talk, whilst she allowed her thoughts to wander away. At her right there was a flower-bed under the wall, where tall hollyhocks, not yet in bloom, leant confidentially towards each other as if imparting affairs of importance or gossip or scandal, whilst a ribbon of mignonette below made the air sweet. On her left, great heavy-headed blush-roses were blowing on the wall: The murmur of bees was all around. It was a day when Nature seemed to have gone to sleep, and only stirred from time to time in dreamy contentment as a breeze passed over it and rustled amongst the leaves. Kit interrupted Miss Carrington's reflections.

‘Do you know Mr. Verschoyle?’ he inquired, his eyes fixed on the top, which was just now spinning with marked success. ‘No? I do. Marie says he is a *vaurien*,’ finished Master Kit shrewdly.

‘Perhaps Marie does not know much about it,’ observed Eve absently, more from a dislike of the child’s gossip than from any desire to defend the subject of it.

Kit, however, resenting her scepticism, took up arms.

‘She does know,’ he retorted. ‘She knows all about it—she says she does. He stole money once, and she said he would have been a *forçat* if he had got what he deserved.’

The girl rose and moved away. She did not like her nephew, nor his conversation, and had besides become aware that the quarter of an hour had more than elapsed, at the end of which she had promised Patricia to interrupt her *tête-à-tête* with her ex-lover.

She was not naturally shy; but still she was conscious of some embarrassment as, without allowing herself time for hesitation, she opened the door of the drawing-room, where the interview was taking place.

On the threshold, however, she paused. Mrs. Ross was sitting on a low chair facing her, just a little flushed and shaken out of her habitual bright serenity. Above her, on the hearthrug, stood Verschoyle. He was speaking as Eve entered in a low measured voice, but turned at the sound of the opening door, and for a second faced her.

Sometimes in days to come Eve recalled that moment, and her first look at his face, with a vain and unavailing wonder that no instinct had told her what it was to become to her, that no compassionate warning had been vouchsafed. But none such came.

‘What a handsome face!’ was her first thought; ‘what a disagreeable one!’ her

second, as involuntarily Patricia's comment upon his temper recurred to her mind. It well might.

Every line of his countenance was set and hard, his brows drawn together till they made a straight black bar across his forehead; whilst the total absence of any sort of violence, either of voice or manner, only served to emphasize the restraint he was putting upon himself.

It was but a moment before, acknowledging with a slight bow the introduction that Mrs. Ross, with manifest relief, hastened to make, he turned to her again. If she had imagined that her sister's presence would serve to put an end to the discussion of disturbing topics, she was to find out her mistake. Scarcely pausing for a moment, he again took up the thread of what he had been saying when interrupted by Eve's entrance, and as if unconscious of the presence of a third person.

Perhaps he had detected and resolved to defeat Patricia's object.

'Let us understand each other at last,' he said. 'It would have been better had we done so earlier. I am to understand that you refuse me, not because, as you stated six months ago, I am poor, nor because, as you wrote last week, your mind has changed since the time you promised to marry me, but because I am a disgraced man? Have I expressed your meaning correctly?'

'Why will you force me to put into words what it is at least as painful to me to say as it can be to you to hear?'

With surprise Eve noticed a certain slight quiver in her sister's voice; she had yet to learn that surface emotions are most easily roused when there is no depth below. Verschoyle perhaps had judged Patricia with greater accuracy when he had selected his present mode of procedure as the one which

would give him the chance of a revenge, which, slight as it might be, was all that it lay in his power to inflict upon the shallow and selfish nature of the woman who had wronged and deceived him. Of what additional pain might accrue to himself in the process he recked little. He was a man who, like Samson, would have pulled down the pillars of the house to crush his enemies, though he himself should be involved in their destruction.

‘I am sorry if it gives you pain,’ he said. His voice never changed from its level modulations, but a touch of sarcasm found its way into it as he spoke. ‘I am sorry to force you to say what gives you pain, but you may set your solicitude at rest as regards my share of it. It is my desire—it is the reason for which I have sought this interview—to have a distinct answer to the question I have asked. Shall I repeat it?

Is it now—and was it six months ago—because I am a disgraced man that you have refused to marry me?’

There was a moment's pause. All had happened so rapidly that Eve still stood on the threshold. Till now she had had no time to consider or to feel anything save a painful sense of intrusion. Now, however, hastily reviewing her position, she decided that no promise to her sister should compel her to be a further witness of the scene. But as she turned to go Patricia's voice arrested her.

‘Stay, Eve,’ she said; ‘do not go.’

Still the girl hesitated—not for her own sake only, but for Verschoyle's. Surely he had a right to the explanation he had sought, and to receive it unwitnessed. As if divining her thoughts he, too, turned.

‘Pray stay, Miss Carrington,’ he said, ‘if your sister prefers that you should be pre-

sent. It can make no difference to me who hears the answer to the question I have asked.'

Again there was a silence. Eve had crossed over to the window-seat, and there sat down.

Glancing up at Gilbert she saw that his eyes were fixed on her sister, relentlessly compelling her answer; and, as she looked, she realized that, however it might have been once, the passion that darkened them now bore no relationship to love. He waited in absolute silence.

'Since you will have it—yes,' Patricia said at last.

'And the reasons you gave me, then and now, were false?' he said.

'Yes;' her voice was barely audible.

'Then there is nothing more to say, except that if you had told me the truth six months ago it would have saved us both this, and I,

at least, should have been the last to blame you.'

He turned to go. Patricia looked up. She had risen and stood before him, her white hands clasped, her hazel eyes, wet with tears, raised to his. She did not, perhaps, love him; she had spoken with absolute and unusual honesty when she had told Eve that she had no heart; yet now some transitory emotion swayed her. There was nothing in Gilbert Verschoyle, nothing in the tragedy and ruin of his life, that had power to move her; yet looking at his face, darkened with an anger and a contempt she only dimly understood, and remembering, as she could not choose but do, that he was the man she had once at least believed herself to love, some faint regret stirred within her, though untouched by repentance.

'Gilbert, forgive me,' she said.

'Forgive you—I have nothing to forgive.'

He paused and looked her steadily in the face, scanning it line by line. 'Yet I will do more—I *thank* you.'

He turned to leave the room. As he did so, moved by a sudden impulse, Eve came forward.

'Good-bye,' she said.

He paused, surprised, and took the hand she had held out, meeting the grave eyes she raised to his.

'Good-bye,' he said, then dropping her hand, was gone.

As the door closed behind him, Patricia turned to her sister; already the momentary ripple of emotion which had stirred her was over. Relief, clear and manifest, was in her face, and in the long breath she drew.

'Well, that is over,' she said. 'What do you think of him?'

'He is not guilty,' answered Eve absently.

'What! tried and acquitted!' said Patricia,

with a light laugh. 'May one ask your grounds? You heard him—he did not deny it. Upon what do you found your assertion?'

'I don't know—nothing, I suppose,' answered the girl; 'but I am sure that he is innocent.'

'Don't be too sure, my dear child,' said Mrs. Ross gaily; 'or rather be as sure as you like, but don't act upon your certainty. It is a safe rule in life to believe everyone to be good—which is pleasant; and to act upon the opposite assumption—which is wise.'

She laughed again, but Eve did not respond. Verschöyle's face was still before her, his bitter words in her ears; and yet it was not them alone which lent the sadness to her eyes as she gazed out into the yellowing light of the summer evening. It was as if through them a vista had been opened to her into another sphere than that—pure, serene, and

untroubled—in which she was an habitual dweller ; and she gazed with sad and fascinated eyes into a world of lost possibilities, of trampled ideals and wrecked hopes ; a world in which poor humanity struggled in vain, and agonized, and was lost. It is strange with what suddenness such glimpses into other worlds than our own visit us, flashing across our vision with the blinding vividness of lightning, and sometimes vanishing almost as swiftly, leaving behind them only a dim recollection of gates rolled back, and of sights and sounds—of possibilities—other than those of which we had dreamt, and which confuse and bewilder us with their new and startling significance. We can scarcely trace, perhaps, whence they came, how they originated ; but one thing is certain, that once having been, they are never completely forgotten. Ignorance is retrievable, knowledge never. The realization, brought home for the first time,

that side by side with the world of mercy and truth in which our lines may have been cast, there exist others in which wrong and injustice and cruelty are triumphant, and tyranny bears sway, corresponds in the moral and spiritual sphere to the effect that the first personal realization of death in the physical world produces. It had been believed in before, now it is known, and the taint and brand of mortality lies upon all living things.

Truly many worlds exist, some touching and intersecting each other, but of which the inhabitants are ignorant of the language of any save their own ; some, again, as remote and separated by as wide and deep a gulf as that across which Dives cried to Abraham in vain, but from which some Lazarus still looks down in pity, and would fain quit Abraham's bosom to go and slake, if so he might, the thirst of some sinner below.

To Eve Carrington, Verschoyle had been all unconsciously the exponent and interpreter of a new world more tragic than any at which she had yet guessed.

‘He is innocent,’ she repeated to herself, as she had before said to her sister—‘I know that he is innocent; but the brand of the accusation is on his life, and it is ruining him body and soul. God help him!’





CHAPTER V.

IT was some few days later when one morning not long after breakfast was over, Eve and Mrs. Ross, who were sitting together in the drawing-room, were interrupted by a visitor.

‘I suppose I ought to apologize for coming so early,’ said Sir Cyril Courtney, opening the door and entering unannounced. It was a habit he had retained from the days when he and Eve had expected to be brother and sister, and Eve looked up with a smile of welcome. To her, indeed, he seldom came amiss.

He was a man of perhaps eight or nine and

twenty, not above middle height, although, owing to the smallness of his head, he gave the impression of being taller. His hair, smooth and close cut, was of the light shade of brown which borders upon yellow; he had keen restless eyes, and a thin face with marked features, whilst the touch of colour upon the cheekbones, easily produced by any excitement or annoyance, gave an impression of delicacy confirmed by the narrow build of his chest and shoulders. It was a face denoting more weakness than strength, and there were, moreover, lines about the thin flexible mouth, unshaded by any moustache, which indicated a tendency to discontent or querulousness; yet, taken altogether, he was not without a certain attractiveness of his own which took effect on his surroundings. Whatever might be the reason, he was a man who generally got his way, whether because he was in the habit of

taking it for granted that such would be the case, or whether he obtained it by the touch of feminine weakness which was characteristic of him, rather than by the influence of more masculine qualities. However that might be, and whatever might be his faults and deficiencies, there were few people that Eve loved more than Cyril Courtney. It was an affection made up of many fibres, interwoven with old memories, common sorrows, and the closeness of present intimacy, and partaking somewhat of the inalienable and ineradicable nature commonly supposed to belong only to ties of blood.

‘I ought to apologize,’ he repeated. ‘But to-day, at least, I am not without excuse. My mother sent me.’

He had come forward and had shaken hands with Eve and Mrs. Ross, before proceeding to take possession of the biggest armchair the room afforded. Sir Cyril, Eve

sometimes told him, had an absolute genius for making himself comfortable: he would have contrived it even under the most unpromising circumstances—in a railway waiting-room, or a third-class carriage.

‘My mother hopes you will both come and stay next week. If I could have seen you separately I should have held out different inducements. I should have told you, Mrs. Ross, that you would find a brilliant and witty company assembled to meet you; and Eve, that charity compelled her to come and help us to entertain the dullest party we could possibly have got together. Finding you, however, both here, I have no alternative but to deliver my mother’s message honestly.’

‘One *is* obliged to have recourse to truth occasionally, as a last resource,’ observed Mrs. Ross parenthetically.

‘Oh, not often,’ replied Sir Cyril. ‘One likes to keep it in reserve; it is emphatically

one of the things not intended for common use. I am sure you agree with me?’

He had glanced at Mrs. Ross with a bright keen glance, not unmingled with irony, and suggestive of some recollection on his part of Patricia’s characteristics. Eve, too, glanced at her sister, sensible of a slight curiosity as to Mrs. Ross’s reply. The latter, however, was embarrassed neither by Cyril’s appeal nor by Eve’s observation, though she was not unaware of it.

‘Agree with you? well, perhaps so,’ she answered; ‘I reverence truth too much to love it. But to return from the moral to the practical question, may we not hear what was Lady Courtney’s message?’

‘I was coming to that. It is that her guests are a dull set, and that she makes it her special request that you will give her your assistance in entertaining them.’

‘Are you sure that you are delivering your

mother's message correctly after all?' asked Eve. 'Has she ever been known to call her guests, or indeed anyone else, dull?'

'I was true to the spirit, though perhaps not to the letter. That is my idea of veracity—people commonly reverse it. What she did say was that she was afraid *they* might find it dull, which comes to precisely the same thing. You should correct your tendency to a carping and cavilling spirit, Miss Carrington. If half a dozen people are incapable of amusing each other, it follows that they are dull people, and in this case the inference is certainly correct. Therefore, I appeal to your charity. Eve, at least, has a fund of it—haven't you discovered it, Mrs. Ross—a tendency to espouse the cause of the worst specimens of the human race?'

'Yes, perhaps so,' replied Patricia. 'Yes,' as she remembered the incident of two days ago—'I believe you are right.'

‘I am sure I am. Her capacity for idealism is simply boundless, and of course the lower the object you select to exercise it upon, the greater the scope it affords. Well, to return—Eve’s charity will bring her, I am sure; and you, Mrs. Ross, can borrow a little of hers. She will never miss it, even if you do not remember to give it back when done with; and I think I can promise you will be honest in that respect. It is a most inconvenient commodity to carry about with you.’

‘Do you speak from experience?’ inquired Patricia. It may be observed that Cyril was not noted for his general good-nature.

‘I do. I tried it once—long ago, when I was young and impressionable. I never spoke any harm of anyone for a week—never took away a character, or made an ill-natured remark; but I couldn’t keep it up. My best friends began to find me tire-

some. Then I tried doing kind actions, as the copy-books say, but that answered still worse. Not one of them turned out well. My worst failure was when I undertook to propose to a lady for a man who was too shy to manage it for himself. I did it so well, too. She accepted me—him, I mean—at once; but would you believe it—I found it was the other sister *he* had meant, and *she* had meant me! I was never more crushed in my life.’

‘It was inconvenient,’ observed Mrs. Ross sympathetically. ‘What did you do?’

‘Oh, I got them married—I insisted upon it. I told him she was much nicer than her sister. I dare say she was. I didn’t like either of them.’

‘And what did you tell her—that he was nicer than you?’

‘No, that would have been too much for my conscience; he wasn’t nice at all. That

was the reason,' plaintively, 'that I undertook the business. No woman in her senses could have accepted him if he had proposed for himself. No, I told her I could not betray my friend's confidence—it sounded very well—also that he was just about twice as well off as I was. She made up her mind to it, and the marriage has turned out remarkably well, except that my friend has never liked me quite as well since. It is ungrateful of him, after all I went through. Then you will come? I may tell my mother she may reckon upon you? It will really be a relief to her; she is not equal to entertaining a houseful unassisted. I often wish,' with a veiled glance at Eve, 'that she had a daughter.'

'You have not yet told us who we are to have the pleasure of meeting,' observed Eve, interrupting Sir Cyril's reflections. 'Of what does the party consist?'

‘Let me think. There is Lord Ralston—I put him first, because he invariably puts himself so. He is a man with a future—I think that exactly describes him. There is nothing else worth mentioning about him. I detest men with futures; they are a class by themselves. A man with a past is bad enough; but at least there is a chance it may contain something or somebody besides himself, whereas a man’s future never does.’

‘You are quite right,’ agreed Mrs. Ross. ‘Also, there is nothing to attack in a man’s future. It places one at a great disadvantage. We are to understand, then, that you dislike Lord Ralston?’

‘Very much,’ answered Sir Cyril candidly. ‘He is one of the few men who possess absolutely no redeeming points in my eyes. I used to take some little interest in annoying him; but I even got tired of that. I had discovered that he liked arguing better than anything

else in the world, so I not only made a point of agreeing with him, but emphasized all his remarks. He has such a contempt for my intellect that he began to doubt the wisdom of his own views when he discovered that I shared them. He hates me,' concluded Sir Cyril with satisfaction ; ' I never succeeded better ; he never addresses me now when he can possibly help it. Then the Erskines are coming ; the parson and his sisters. I should rather like the Miss Erskines if they were not so active, and did not expect to be taken to walk or drive every day ; and, besides, they talk slang. I hate a woman who talks slang. The brother is a good little chap. I like him. I met him this morning, by the way,' laughing at the recollection. ' He is sorely exercised in his ministerial mind about an addition lately made to his flock. It seems Verschoyle has come home—the fellow who forged, you know—and Erskine is afraid he

may have a bad influence on the parish ; a case of wickedness in high places. I comforted him by assurances that he couldn't possibly intend to live there ; but little Erskine was quite perturbed. I believe he was not certain that it was not his duty to try and reclaim the sinner.'

'Did he ask your advice?' inquired Mrs. Ross rather nervously, as Eve made no comment.

'Not exactly, but I gave it. I advised him to let Verschoyle alone. Well, then, two or three more men are coming, and that is all. It does not sound lively, does it? But a week can't last for ever with the best will in the world, and I dare say we shall survive it. You will come?'

He had turned to Eve, and she assented ; yielding also to his subsequent suggestion that she should accompany him as far as the stables, where he had left his horse.

They walked down the avenue, talking of Mrs Ross and her stay at Nortons, of familiar and unembarrassing topics ; but through all Eve was vaguely and disquietingly conscious, as she had not seldom been of late, that a disturbing element was growing daily more apt to interrupt the ease of their intercourse. In the presence of others it was less apparent ; but when with Cyril alone, there was a restlessness, almost amounting to impatience, in his manner which troubled her. She knew, as her sister had said, that he was waiting, and perhaps guessed that, though he dared not as yet put it to the touch, he was beginning to find the waiting long. She sighed as she noticed the occasional jar in his voice, and the little touches of temper that betrayed themselves, as it were, in spite of himself.

‘ You should have the trees thinned,’ he said, as they came to a spot where several of a

group were pressing upon one another. 'They will be spoilt.'

'Perhaps you are right,' answered the girl. 'I will speak to Baylis about it. He told me some time ago that it ought to be done, but I put it off. I like to leave everything as it is as long as possible.'

'I am glad you added that saving clause,' said Courtney. 'What *can* remain as it is? If you force a thing to be stationary, it only means death to itself or its neighbours. Look at the destruction that larch is inflicting around it. It is, after all, only selfishness dressed up as sentiment.' He was trying to speak lightly, but there was a tone in his voice which belied his attempt. 'Sometimes,' he added abruptly, and with seeming irrelevance to the subject in hand—'sometimes I hate the past.'

'The past?' repeated Eve absently. She was thinking for how long the past had

seemed to her to contain all that was worth loving, how even her affection for Cyril himself owed half its force and depth to it. 'What is the past? Nothing is really past so long as it lives in us. It is of our faithlessness alone that it is born.'

She was speaking dreamily; but Cyril looked at her with a sort of restless impatience.

'You would like the impossible,' he said. 'You would like to prove that the world can stand still, and everything remain as it was. You are wrong; however convincing your arguments may be, "*e pur si muove*."'

Eve did not at once answer. Certain of his words had struck home, and raised a question in her own heart. *Was* her lingering over the past, her reluctance to dissociate herself from it by what would be a new departure—was it indeed, as he had hinted, selfishness in the form of sentiment? She looked at Cyril rather wistfully, but made no answer; and a

few minutes later, having reached the stables, they parted. As she walked back alone to the house, her head bent and her eyes on the ground, Eve pondered. She knew that, though Cyril's words had been spoken in jest, he had meant what they implied, and she wondered if the implication was just. Was she selfish? Was she wasting the life of the man she loved best in the world, the dearest friend—with all his faults—that she possessed, for no good reason? The question forced itself on her in spite of herself, and bringing with it the consciousness that the answer to it could not be long delayed.

* * * *

When, an hour later, Cyril entered his mother's sitting-room, he found her alone and engaged with some white work, which she put down as he came in. She had a sweet placid face and fair hair, as yet only touched with grey, smoothed away under a cap of soft, fine lace.

‘Yes, they will come,’ he said, in answer to her question. ‘I told Eve that you could not do without her. I was right, was I not?’ coming to lean over the back of her chair. He had the manner, caressing if exacting, of a spoilt child.

‘Quite right, my dear,’ answered Lady Courtney. ‘Did you tell her’—with a gentle smile—‘that you could not do without her either?’

He too smiled, though colouring slightly.

‘Not yet,’ he said. There were no secrets between them.

‘You are patient,’ she said, with something not unlike a sigh.

‘That,’ he answered, a momentary cloud crossing his face, ‘is a virtue that has been forced upon me. And what have you been doing this morning?’ he added, changing the subject.

‘Little Dorothy Verschoylc has been here.

Poor child, I am sorry for her. I am sure she feels her position.'

'Dorothy Verschoyle?' repeated Cyril, bringing his attention with some difficulty to bear upon the subject. 'Why is she to be pitied? Oh, you mean because of her unlucky brother. It is unfortunate, certainly—the more so since her father chose to die in that casual way. She is actually left to this man's guardianship, isn't she?'

'His sole guardianship—yes. It is most unfortunate, poor little girl! If she had not such good principles I should feel very anxious about her; and as it is——'

'As it is, my dear mother, I don't think you need feel the slightest uneasiness about Miss Dorothy. I am sorry for her, of course, and I think it is an instance of the irony of destiny to have put such a little piece of propriety into the guardianship of a man like Verschoyle. There is really a sort of dramatic

incongruity about it; but I think you need have no fear that she will be led into evil courses. She has far too profound a sense of what is due to herself. In two or three years, when she is grown up, the real inconvenience of the situation will appear.'

'She tells me he is come home.'

'Ah, so Erskine said. I suppose he has only just run down to see to things. He cannot be meaning to stay.'

'I think he is—from what the child said. I did not like to ask her much about him.'

'It will be a most ill-judged proceeding if he does,' said Sir Cyril, with some heat. 'The only thing for a man of that sort to do—especially if he has the luck to have money—is to take himself clean off to a new place and try to make a fresh start of it. Here, where every soul knows his story, it is an impossible position.'

‘Yet it seems hard on him,’ said Lady Courtney softly.

‘He has been hard upon himself,’ retorted Sir Cyril. ‘A man ought to suffer the penalty of his acts. Where would society be if he did not? Women—forgive me, my dearest mother—never take a right view of these things. It seems there is some mental incapacity about them which prevents it. They are invariably soft where they ought to be hard, and hard where they ought to be soft. I am as sorry as you can be for the whole business; and I am the last man in the world to be hard on a fellow when he is down—I have not the belief in human nature and the impossible standard of virtue that such an inclination presupposes; but after all there must be limits to toleration, and I think dishonesty—cheating, in fact—marks that limit.’

‘Then you will not leave your card?’

‘No.’ He got up and went to stand over the empty fireplace. ‘No, I don’t see that it would do anything but harm ; it could only lead to complications in the future. I couldn’t have a fellow of that kind about the house ; it is not fair upon the people who might meet him. You must see it yourself, my dear mother’—Sir Cyril spoke with some impatience ; all the more because, as he had said, he was not a man to be hard upon another when he was down, and felt somewhat aggrieved by having such a position forced upon him by circumstances—‘you must see it yourself. Imagine Eve—anyone——’ he broke off. ‘I have no doubt life has been rough enough upon Verschoyle, poor beggar ; but that doesn’t alter the facts, or one’s duty towards society. I can’t have a forger, who happened to escape conviction, at the house.’

‘I suppose you are right,’ said his mother ;

but she sighed as she took up her work again. Perhaps Cyril was right, and women have a natural incapacity for taking a just view on such subjects.





CHAPTER VI.

IT was, after all, alone that Eve set out the next week to keep her engagement and pay the promised visit to the Courtneys.

At the last moment Mrs. Ross had received a communication from her solicitor, which rendered it necessary that she should go at once to London to sign papers and transact business, though she hoped to get it done in time to return the next day and join her sister at Mace Court.

‘It is very tiresome,’ she had said discontentedly, when the summons arrived by the afternoon post the day before. ‘Old Kent is

so fussy; he declares it is absolutely necessary the papers should be signed at once. I wish he would do it himself. It would be an indictable offence? Well, what if it is? it is just like his selfishness not to be willing to run the risk rather than bring me up to London in this weather.'

'You have a high standard of unselfishness,' said Eve, unable to suppress a smile.

'Ah, I know what you mean. You think I am selfish myself. Perhaps I am, but I only want to be happy and enjoy life. Nobody else has a right to my happiness. Everybody should look out for themselves, and then everybody would be properly attended to; whereas the state of affairs, which has somehow got to be considered the ideal one, is exactly like a badly managed Irish household, where all the servants—from the best of motives, no doubt—are running about doing each other's work. Nobody

knows our wants so well as we do; therefore it is only common-sense to say we had each better take care of ourselves. It is the unusual case of an exactly balanced state of supply and demand—one person to attend to one person, whereas on the opposite theory everyone is to attend to everyone, *except* themselves. It comes to exactly the same thing in the end, only the work is done badly instead of well.'

'And what if two people happen to want the same thing?'

.'Ah, then comes in the *droit du plus fort*. After all, it is the easiest way of settling the matter.'

Eve was silent, half amused, half sad. She knew Patricia's theories were actually those upon which she based her life and conduct. She never combated, never even openly blamed them; she had long lived down her young impatience of low standards and

unworthy rules of life, and she had also outlived her young hope of changing them where they existed. She was accustomed to take people as she found them—a little sad, perhaps, but neither hard upon them nor impatient.

Mrs. Ross started early the next morning, intending to have the day in London, and get, if possible, the business which had taken her there completed. The weather was, indeed, oppressively and unusually hot, even for July. There had been no rain for weeks; the roads were white and dusty, and the lawns and hedges parched.

Eve's head had been aching all day, and she had put off her seven miles' drive till an hour when the heat might be reasonably expected to have, in some degree at least, spent itself. It was, therefore, between five and six in the evening that she set off.

She was tired by the long hot day, and

lay back in a corner of the carriage, closing her eyes, and giving herself up to the luxurious dreaminess which rapid movement through the air, coupled with physical weariness, is wont to produce. She was, however, doomed to interruption. They had not gone far--were, in fact, not more than two or three miles from home--when, having just descended a steep hill covered with loose rolling stones, the coachman drew up with a jerk.

‘Is anything wrong?’ she asked, opening her eyes. ‘What is the matter, Griffiths?’

‘One of the horses has cast a shoe, ma’am,’ returned that functionary, having descended to ascertain the extent of the mischief. ‘He is going lame, too.’

‘How very inconvenient!’ exclaimed Eve. She knew the country well; they were at least four miles from their destination, and she was well aware, moreover, that there

was no forge nearer than the one in the little village below Nortons. 'How very inconvenient! What can be done?'

'I am sure I don't know, miss,' replied Griffiths. 'I am afraid we must just drive him slowly home.'

Eve considered. By the time she reached Nortons it would be already past six, and before she could make another start it would be certainly too late to bring her to Mace in time for dinner. However, there was evidently no alternative, and she was preparing to acquiesce in Griffiths's decision, when a dogcart, driving rapidly from the direction in which they had come, slackened its pace preparatory to passing the carriage, which filled up most of the space in the narrow lane, and then pulled up short at the sight of Griffiths, still standing on the road, contemplating his horses with perplexity depicted upon his face.

‘Is anything the matter?’ said a voice Eve had heard before. ‘Can I be of any assistance?’

She turned round with a swift movement, and once more her eyes met those of Gilbert Verschoyle.

Her face had been turned away, and, coming up behind, he had not recognised the occupant of the carriage. As he caught sight of her, and took off his hat in acknowledgment of her bow, a change, slight but significant, passed over his face, and he turned at once again to the coachman, repeating his question with a shade more of stiffness in his manner.

Griffiths replied by an exhaustive account of the accident, dilating moreover upon its special inopportuneness. He was inclined to be garrulous, and being unacquainted with Verschoyle’s personal appearance, saw in him only a gentleman evidently known to his mistress.

Gilbert paused before he answered. When he spoke it was without looking at Eve, and in the perfunctory manner of a man who is making an offer which civility demands, but which he neither wishes nor expects to be accepted.

‘If you like to avail yourself of my dog-cart, Miss Carrington,’ he said, ‘it is quite at your service. Your servant,’ glancing at Griffiths, ‘could no doubt leave the horses to be taken home by the groom.’

He was making it clear that it was his dog-cart and not his escort that he was offering. Eve hesitated. If the proposal had come from any other man equally little known to her, she would in all probability have declined it ; but the very fact which would have operated with most people in precisely the opposite direction—her knowledge, namely, of the character he bore, and the consciousness which his manner conveyed that he expected and anticipated a

refusal—made her hesitate. Griffiths, however, interposed, in a low voice inaudible to the groom :

‘ I am very sorry, ma’am, but I could not trust James to take the horses home. He only came last week,’ he added explanatorily to Verschoyle, ‘ and knows no more about driving than a child.’

‘ Then I am afraid there is no help for it,’ said Verschoyle. ‘ The engagement must be broken, I am afraid, Miss Carrington—unless indeed,’ again he spoke with studied indifference, ‘ you would let me leave you at Mace Court.’

Again the thought of the construction he would be likely to put upon a refusal on her part was uppermost in her mind, as she answered quickly.

‘ Thank you,’ she said. ‘ It would really not take you too far out of your way? then I shall be very grateful.’

She had spoken without giving herself time for consideration ; but she had scarcely uttered the words before the sense of the anomaly of her position seized upon her, accepting, as she was doing, a favour from the man whom her sister had thrown over. If she had failed to perceive the singularity of the situation, it would have been brought home to her by the flash of surprise which, suppressed as it was almost at once, yet crossed his face. It was, however, done and irrevocable; in two minutes more he had helped her into the dogcart, and she was driving rapidly by his side through the narrow lanes.

As she realized more and more distinctly the position into which she had put herself by yielding to her ill-considered impulse, Eve became, for one of the first times in her life, the prey of an overwhelming embarrassment. She was not used to be shy, though the quietness of her manner sometimes gave the im-

pression that she was so; but now her face burnt, and her hands grew cold. Already she bitterly repented her rash act of Quixotism, as she knew Patricia would have called it—would call it now if, as she trusted would never be the case, it came to her knowledge. She sat looking straight before her in the short silence that ensued, her hands nervously clasping each other as they lay together on her knee.

Verschoyle, for his part, said nothing; instinctively she guessed that he would make no effort to relieve any embarrassment she might feel. He had made his offer because, under the circumstances, he could scarcely do less; and since she had fallen into the inconceivable mistake of accepting his proposal, he had had no choice but to act upon it, but he evidently meant to do nothing to help her to forget the peculiarity of the situation.

Presently, feeling that anything would be

preferable to silence, she spoke in a low, rapid tone, which was even a little tremulous.

‘It was fortunate for me that you happened to pass,’ she said. ‘They are expecting me at Mace, and I should have been terribly late if I had had to return home again. I am so much obliged to you.’

‘Pray do not mention it,’ he answered formally. ‘The obligation is all on my side. Also, I shall scarcely have to go two hundred yards out of my way. The road runs straight past the lodge-gates.’

‘You live some way beyond Mace, do you not?’ she asked, catching at anything to say rather than relapse into silence, and again aware that she had no assistance to expect from Verschoyle in her efforts at conversation.

‘Two miles,’ he answered laconically.

‘You had come far to-day,’ she went on, still with the sensation of laying hold of any

plank to enable her to keep her head above water. 'Had you been to see the Grants?'

'No,' he said shortly. 'I do not know them. I know nobody.'

His tone completed her confusion. Unpleasant as it was, she guessed that it was not unintentionally or accidentally so, but was meant to be an explicit declaration of his position, as if he might have imagined that she had intended to sound him on the subject. The fear that he might, indeed, have so misunderstood her question deprived her of her last remains of self-possession.

'I—I beg your pardon,' she said hastily.

'What! for imagining that I might be acquainted with the Grants? That, surely, scarcely requires an apology—unless, indeed, their acquaintance should be particularly compromising.'

Again his tone was disagreeable, as if he had detected her embarrassment and was amusing

himself at her expense. Eve made no answer. Absolutely and entirely miserable as she was, she was feeling acutely that she had only herself to thank for the predicament in which she was placed, and the consciousness did not tend to lessen her annoyance. Presently Verschoyle bent to arrange her dress, which was dangerously near the wheel; and in doing so, for the first time he looked full at her. On the only other occasion upon which they had met he had had no attention to spare for Mrs. Ross's sister; but now, as he surveyed her steadily and deliberately, she acquired a new interest in his eyes, though it was one which took its colour and tone from the recollection of her relationship to Patricia. When he spoke again, his voice and manner had changed to a cool and careless familiarity which was more distasteful to the girl than his former constraint and moody silence.

‘Confess that you consider me an ill-

mannered brute, Miss Carrington,' he said, smiling, 'and that you regret having so far forgotten yourself as to allow me the honour of driving you to Mace.'

Eve made no answer. She was conscious of a ridiculous inclination—to which she would have died sooner than give way—to cry, like a child who had been roughly treated. Verschoyle, however, took no notice of her silence, but talked on in the same tone, regardless of her short responses, and doing his best to efface any impression his former taciturnity might have produced. His conversation was not otherwise than agreeable, yet as Eve listened she became more and more silent. It was not so much that she resented his tone to herself, though the slight, almost imperceptible shade of disrespect did not escape her, nor the touch of familiarity, new to her experience as it was. It was not anger, or at least not chiefly nor principally anger, that she felt. There was at all

times little room in her nature for the rankling of a personal slight; and had it been otherwise, how could she resent his tone when he spoke lightly of women, when it had—alas!—been her own sister who had helped to teach him to do so? how be angry at the veiled and bitter sarcasms hidden behind his jests, when the world at which he scoffed had deserved so ill at his hands? It was not anger that she felt, but something deeper and sadder. Once again he was opening and unfolding to her that world of injustice and bitterness and wrong of which he had unconsciously been her first exponent; and gazing into it, a great compassion, which left no place for resentment, filled her for the man who represented it; a pity which was only deepened by every word or sign which indicated the injury his whole nature had sustained. Had he come through the ordeal unscathed she might, nay, certainly would, have honoured him; but she would

not have felt the passion of pity—it is a passion with some women, strong as that to which it is said to be akin—which swept across her now, worsted as she instinctively felt him to have been in the struggle, scarred and defaced by it morally and spiritually.

Her attention had wandered from what he was saying, although she was apparently listening and making what answers were necessary. Suddenly, however, it was recalled by a direct appeal.

‘It was hard luck, was it not, Miss Carington?’ he was saying. ‘Do you not feel sorry for me?’

She turned, startled yet scarcely surprised. Detached as the words were, so far as she was concerned, from all that had preceded them, they chimed in with strange relevancy with the thoughts in which she had been lost. She forgot that he was a stranger speaking to a stranger; did not wait to consider the

improbability—rather the impossibility—that he should be, in earnest, claiming her sympathy. Abruptly, without pause or hesitation, she answered, as if his question had borne reference, not to the trifle of which he had been speaking, but to that for which Gilbert Verschoyle had never asked or accepted sympathy or compassion from living soul, and for which, had they ever been offered, he would have flung them back with scorn.

‘Do you not feel sorry for me?’ he had asked.

‘I do—I do,’ she said, with a catch in her voice that was like a sob.

As the words and tone struck his ear he turned in sharp inquiry, meeting, as he did so, her eyes fixed upon him. For a moment they looked straight into his, grave, compassionate and sorrowful, and in the involuntary unspoken question and answer that

flashed between them the meaning of her words was made plain to him. The next moment he had turned abruptly away, flushing darkly.

Even now habit was strong, and a scoffing retort rose to his lips, but there it died. After that one look he never glanced towards her, looking steadily before him as they drove on.

They had already nearly reached their destination, and were passing through a village about half a mile from the house. A few scattered cottages on the edge of rich pasture-land; one or two women standing at their doors with babies in their arms; some little children playing on a bit of dried-up grass, while a dog, looking on at the game, lazily stretched himself; a glimpse of scattered red roofs among cornfields—then the little bit of human life was over, and once more they were driving on in solitude.

Yet those few minutes had effected a change that years of common intercourse might have failed to do. Between them now was the subtle indestructible link of an unspoken confidence, a question asked and answered straight from soul to soul.

They drove the remaining half-mile in silence, absolute and unbroken. When he had drawn up at the door, he helped her down, still without speaking.

‘Good-bye,’ she said. The slanting yellow light—the evening was closing in—fell on her fair grave face and sad eyes as she stood a little above him on the step in her clinging white dress, a fading spray of heliotrope at her throat, and her hand held out.

Verschoyle looked at her, straight and steadily, a curious unaccustomed sensation stealing over him—something that was half remorse, half a regret. Yet, when he turned

a moment later to go, he had not seemed to see her offered band ; only silently lifted his hat, and drove away through the darkening avenue to his home.





CHAPTER VII.

THE party at Mace, after all, did not prove other than a success. It is always difficult to foretell success or failure in such a case; a turn of the kaleidoscope may alter the position of all the component parts, and disprove the most careful forecasts.

Sir Cyril was perhaps right when he described Lord Ralston as a man with a future; it was at least certain that it was in this light that he regarded himself. His future was, as it were, his stock in trade. It was also true that, being now forty years of age, his best friends and firmest disciples were

beginning to feel dimly conscious that it was time that the future which had been so constantly and hopefully discussed should become the present. Hitherto there had always existed excellent reasons why that process should be deferred. He had had a serious illness ; his friends had been out of power ; he himself had been anxious to attain to a greater degree of the cultivation and general knowledge for which, as he was wont to say, he would have no time hereafter, before launching himself finally on the sea of public life. All these reasons and causes for delay had seemed plausible ; but there is a limit even to praiseworthy caution, and, as has been said, his friends were beginning to be of opinion that the limit had been reached. Whether Lord Ralston thought so himself was another matter. There was a serene self-complacency about him which argued entire confidence and conviction of final

success, and it was perhaps on this account that people still to a certain extent believed in him; belief in one's self being the first qualification for inspiring faith. Still it cannot be denied that many people were beginning to find Lord Ralston's future long in coming, and to listen with less patience than formerly to his hints on the subject.

From her first appearance on the scene, however, Mrs. Ross had taken an interest in it. Whatever may be the sentiments with which a man's problematical career may be regarded by others, it has an interest all its own for those who may feel themselves personally involved in its success or failure; and from the first it had occurred to Patricia that this might not impossibly be the case with herself. Before she had been four-and-twenty hours under the same roof with his lordship, she had taken his measure, had weighed him in her dispassionate balances,

and had decided that, with all its disadvantages, the prize was not unworthy to be striven for ; and since she had appeared at Mace, Lord Ralston had been upon no one else's hands.

It is true nobody grudged him to her. Sir Cyril, so far as his duties as host allowed it, was as usual devoting himself to Eve ; the Miss Erskines were dividing their attention between lawn-tennis and riding, and their brother, a red-haired, zealous little parson, suspected of broad views, tolerant, kindly and popular, was usually absent most of the day, superintending parochial matters in the village, some three miles off, where his duty lay.

To Eve the visit had been pleasant. She loved Lady Courtney, and had always accounted her house a second home since the days of her loss ; and she had acquired a sort of quiet dexterity in avoiding *tête-à-têtes* or

exciting topics with her host. Of the manner of her arrival Miss Carrington had said nothing. She was singularly indifferent to the opinion of the world, even to that part of it formed by her own immediate circle of friends—singularly so, that is, considering her gentle and undefiant nature. It might have been the solitude in which for the most part she lived, which had given her the habit of adopting her own views and acting upon them—quietly, unobtrusively, without parade, but equally without hesitation. If they seemed to clash with the opinions of those she loved—and they were few—or to whom she owed deference, she was sorry; but it did not occur to her to alter them on that account, and still less to alter the course of action resulting from them. Beneath her soft exterior there lay a fund of strength and determination of which few suspected the existence. But, for that very reason, it had grown into a habit

with her to be silent when speech would have evoked disapproval or remonstrance.

Had she been questioned as to her mode of reaching Mace, she would have answered with the whole truth ; but being in the position—peculiar at her age—of there existing none to whom it was due that she should render an account of her actions, she kept the matter, in the absence of questions, to herself. It had taken place, whether rightly or wrongly, by her own choice ; it was done, and in her heart she did not regret it. But being conscious that it might appear differently to other eyes, she simply kept silence on the subject.

On the third afternoon after her arrival, most of the party were scattered about under the trees on the lawn, where tea had been brought, waiting till it should be cool enough for any exertion in the shape of lawn-tennis, walking, or riding.

Eve, somewhat apart, under a big horse-

chestnut-tree, was talking to Cyril, or rather listening to him as he lay at her feet, watching with lazy amusement the rest of the party and making his comments upon them. He was not deficient in humour or in a sort of discernment, and just at present he was indulging in certain speculations concerning Mrs. Ross and Lord Ralston, who were, as usual, together, and to all appearance engaged in earnest conversation.

Lord Ralston—a man with light hair growing rather scanty, a beard of the same colour, pale-blue eyes, and a large forehead—was discoursing, his head thrown back and his eyes, through glasses, surveying a distant gravel walk with grave interest; whilst Patricia, her work dropped on her knee—some people said that Mrs. Ross's work was only produced in order that it *might* be dropped when it should become advisable that her attention should grow absorbed—was listening eagerly,

her pretty hazel eyes fixed upon his face in rapt attention.

‘He’s at it again, I’ll take my oath,’ said Sir Cyril. ‘I am sure I caught the words, “when the party to which I have the honour of belonging”—How can Mrs. Ross stand it? and how will she be able to stand it in the future? You don’t understand? Oh yes, Eve, you do—don’t perjure yourself. You know what it all means. Do you think his lordship will make a satisfactory brother-in-law?’

‘You think she would marry him?’ asked Eve.

The idea was new to her, in spite of Courtney’s words; and glancing across at Lord Ralston, and placing him in swift mental comparison by the side of the man whom, only six months ago, Patricia was to have married, a faint astonishment shot through her.

‘Oh, I could not presume to say,’ answered Cyril, propping his chin on his hand, and taking a deliberate and exhaustive survey of the couple. ‘But I think it looks like it, don’t you? I feel certain *he* means it, though he does appear to select his topics from the chances of the Ministry. I am ashamed to confess that, feeling a real curiosity as to how Ralston would make love, I have taken some pains to ascertain.’

‘Do you think she would be happy?’ asked Eve, still occupied with the possibility he had suggested, and with that comparison before her mind. Cyril shrugged his shoulders.

‘Happiness is relative,’ he observed. ‘Yes, I think Mrs. Ross has a fair chance of it, whatever happens.’

‘You mean——’ said Eve.

‘That she has the advantage of presenting only one vulnerable point for the attacks of fate, whereas most of us have one or two other

breaches in our walls—the fewer the better. I would give the world to care for nothing but myself.’ There was an unmistakable ring of sincerity in his voice—indeed, the candour of his selfishness always disarmed criticism; it was the frank and fretful impatience of a child when he discovers that life will not continue the indulgence of his early years. ‘As it is,’ he went on, ‘I only care for myself most, and that is the worst policy of all; since one is certain to be cheated in the game. Next to absolute selfishness, a great and self-sacrificing love for other people would be most repaying.’

‘Even in that case,’ said Eve, half smiling, ‘even in that case you would not escape suffering. It is only that then it would be at second-hand—through them.’

He laughed and shook his head.

‘I would close with the exchange,’ he said. ‘I feel my brother’s toothache, it is true; but

yet there is a difference—the instrument does not touch the nerve; it is not, to use a Scriptural illustration, the angel's touch which shrinks the sinew, and from which we—some of us—go halting all our lives.'

There was a silence; Eve did not answer at once. She was wondering whether Cyril's words were true; half wishing, as if with some dim prevision of evil, that she could believe them to be so, could believe that the sufferings of others can find no vivid or personal realization. Were such the case—so she felt half unconsciously—were she safe from the blows which might reach her through others, she would have no overwhelming fears of what life might do to her. Cyril was watching her, guessing in part her thoughts.

'Believe me,' he said, 'sympathy bears the same relation to suffering as the echo to the reality. It is cant to call it anything else.'

‘Yet you say,’ she observed rather wistfully, ‘that most of us have vulnerable points outside ourselves.’

He did not attempt to defend the consistency of his argument.

‘So much the worse for us,’ he said; ‘let us at all events make them as few as possible—taking Mrs. Ross for an example. Ah, there she comes,’ as Patricia, whose conversation with Lord Ralston had come to an end a few minutes earlier on his lordship’s discovering that he had important letters to despatch by the evening post, detached herself from a group at a little distance and crossed the lawn to where her sister and Sir Cyril were sitting. ‘We were just speaking of you,’ he added politely. ‘I was urging your sister to take example by you in the management of life.’

Patricia glanced keenly at him, detecting an undercurrent of irony in his words.

‘You will never persuade her to do that,’ she observed; but she did not pursue the subject. ‘Great excitement prevails,’ she added, as she sat down by her sister. ‘Miss Cunningham,’ alluding to a guest who had arrived the evening before, ‘Miss Cunningham has spoken.’

‘You don’t say so!’ returned Cyril, with the interest the subject seemed to demand. ‘Who insulted her? Nothing else could have induced her to forget herself so far. I had made up my mind to try it myself if my mother insisted upon my taking her in to dinner again.’

‘You are wrong,’ observed Patricia, ‘and ungrateful too. Her remark was quite spontaneous, and bore reference to yourself. After long cogitation upon the manner in which you have employed this afternoon,’ with a malicious glance at her sister, who, however, obstinately declined to meet it, ‘she observed

that she always felt sorry for a young man who had no profession.'

'Does she?' replied Sir Cyril. 'Now I call that really kind, and I retract my former remark. I like people to take an interest in me, and somehow they never do. I suppose I am too well conducted to be interesting. I suppose she did not mention what profession she would advise me to adopt?'

'She did not,' replied Mrs. Ross. 'Perhaps, however, if you were to ask her—you see she is disengaged at present.'

'Not just now, I think,' said Sir Cyril hastily. 'It will be invaluable as furnishing us with a topic of conversation hereafter, and should be kept carefully in reserve. Also the lawn is still too hot to cross; it was very courageous of you to brave it.'

Half an hour later, when Lady Courtney sent to summon Eve to drive with her, the three were still together, and Cyril rose and

walked with her to the house. When he had put her into the carriage with his mother, he still stood talking for a few minutes with his hand on the door, until the latter dismissed him.

‘I wish I could come too,’ he observed discontentedly. ‘Driving is the only rational occupation in this weather ; but as it is——’

‘You must stay and attend to your guests, my dear,’ said his mother. ‘Yes, it is quite necessary. Drive on, Benham. He looks ill to-day, does he not?’ she added, turning to Eve as he moved reluctantly away ; ‘I wish he was stronger.’

The girl’s thoughts had wandered, and she made no reply, though Lady Courtney was looking at her rather wistfully. A few minutes later they were driving through the steep Surrey lanes, the hedges nearly meeting over their heads, whilst Lady Courtney talked on steadily in the gentle monotonous way to

which Eve was accustomed, and which to her never grew tedious, of reminiscences of her youth—Lady Courtney had been a famous beauty in her day, and treasured the recollections of her early triumphs with a naïve and pleasant childlike vanity—of Cyril and his boyhood, and of her husband, dead so long that she could dwell upon his memory with no sentiment more painful than a tender regret.

Both he and Lady Courtney's father had been high in the diplomatic service, and having lived much at foreign courts in former days, she had many tales, innocent scandals, pathetic comedies, to narrate, to which Eve was wont to listen with sentiments somewhat similar to those inspired by the portraits of Sir Joshua's powdered ladies and gaily attired noblemen. It was not exciting conversation, but soothing and refreshing, like the constant rippling murmur of a brook ; and the girl

liked it, though her attention still wandered from time to time.

Suddenly, however, she started slightly. Coming towards them, in a rough grey shooting-jacket, with his dogs at his heels, and a cigar in his mouth, was Gilbert Verschoyle.

In another moment they had passed him. The lane was so narrow that he had almost had to stand on one side to allow the large carriage to go by; he had been so near that by reaching out her hand—he was on her side of the carriage—Eve could have touched him; but he had made no sign of recognition, had given her no opportunity of making any. He had not once lifted his eyes as, taking his cigar out of his mouth, he had walked straight past.

The colour which had rushed to her face when she first recognised him, faded rapidly away. She knew he had seen her—he could scarcely, indeed, have failed to do so; and had

it not been thus, the care which he had taken to avoid glancing towards the carriage would have told her as much. She understood what his manner meant; it was no studied and intentional insult, this time at least—of that she acquitted him; neither could it be, now, the expectation that she would desire to ignore their acquaintance—she would not believe that he could so far misjudge her. No, she understood it; it was his tacit but deliberate recognition of the fact that it was best for her that they should meet as strangers, since chance had thus once more brought them face to face, and as such he had meant her to understand it. A sense of shame laid hold of her, as if it had been her fault, as if she had disowned him; and beneath it a sharp, painful realization of what his position in truth must be, since, in his eyes at least, the greatest kindness he could show a woman was *not* to own her acquaintance.

Lady Courtney's voice interrupted her reflections. Her attention had been attracted by the stranger, and she spoke with calm interest.

'What a handsome face, my dear—the man we passed just now, I mean—did you notice him? I wonder who he can be. I thought I knew all the gentlemen about here. He must be paying a visit somewhere in the neighbourhood.'

It was upon Eve's lips to answer by the truth; but yet she hesitated, arrested by a curious sense that in so doing she would be in some sort frustrating his intentions, and acting contrary to his wishes. She remained silent, and Lady Courtney went on placidly.

'I wonder who it can be—such a striking face! Did you not think so, Eve?'

'Yes,' said the girl. Her head was turned away; and, as they almost brushed the hedge, she put out her hand and pulled down a spray

of wild roses that hung just above. They remained in her hand, but a thorn caught and tore it, and the delicate, fragile petals were scattered over her dress.

Benham, the coachman, who had overheard his mistress's speculations, turned and addressed her with the familiarity of a servant who had been for twenty years in the family.

‘Were you inquiring about the gentleman who passed just now, my lady?’ he asked. ‘That was young Mr. Verschoyle.’

He spoke with the air of a man imparting an interesting piece of information, and was not disappointed in Lady Courtney's reception of it.

‘Mr. Verschoyle—was it indeed, Benham?’ Then in a lower voice: ‘Do you hear, Eve? It was Mr. Verschoyle—that poor young fellow. Of course it was his own fault, but it is a melancholy story. You know it, of course?’

Eve bowed her head. The blood burnt in her face; but still that undefined sense of loyalty to his will kept her silent.

‘I know it,’ she said.

‘How many wasted lives there are,’ moralized Lady Courtney, with the mild passing regret accorded to the unknown. ‘It was his own fault, of course; but it is a wasted life.’

‘Waste is the law of life,’ said Eve dreamily, her sad eyes gazing away to the horizon. ‘When it ceases, it is because life has ceased too.’

Lady Courtney made no answer, perhaps she had not caught the girl’s words—certainly she had not understood them; perhaps Eve herself did not quite understand her own meaning. The elder woman sighed gently before, dismissing Verschoyle and his affairs from her mind, she resumed the anecdote she had been telling when she had interrupted herself.

‘Where was I, my dear? Ah, I was telling you, was I not, how Sir George answered the Marquis de R——? He was the wittiest man of his time, you know. I was standing by and heard it. I was two-and-twenty then, and only just married. Those were happy old days——’

So she talked on gently; but though Eve made the proper answers, she heard no more. Her thoughts were occupied with a scene nearer home, as, sitting with her eyes fixed on the roses which lay on her knee, their leaves drooping and their petals fallen, she recalled the look on Verschoyle’s face.





CHAPTER VIII.

IT was already nearly three weeks since Gilbert Verschoyle had returned to Sandmoor. To him it seemed far more; the days had appeared to lengthen themselves out into weeks, the weeks into months. He had already begun to ask himself how it would be possible that he should live his life out there—whether he would be able to bear it.

He had, it is true, been accustomed to solitude; but solitude in a town—a crowded solitude with hurrying life and movement all around—is so essentially different from an isolated one that the former is scarcely

a preparation for the latter. It may be true, as it has been said, that loneliness in a crowd has an isolation about it with which nothing else can compare; but on the other hand, as has also been said, the hurrying life of others somehow destroys or weakens the sense of personal individuality, so that solitude is less unbearable.

To Gilbert the very silence and stillness of the country, to which he had been unaccustomed for years, was oppressive—it was as if life was hushed and, as it were, taking breath; he disliked the large rooms after the lodgings which he had been used to occupy: there was no denying it, he disliked it *all*. Even had his position been different, it is possible that the life of a country gentleman might not have been particularly congenial to him; as it was, it promised to be intolerable.

And yet he was determined, honestly determined, to throw himself into it. He had

come home intending to pass his days as his fathers had done before him, and he meant to persevere, with the dogged determination which was part of his character—to persevere, and, if possible, not allow himself to be beaten. He saw the bailiff, and set himself to learn the details of the business to which he had not had the ordinary chance that comes to most men of his class, of serving an apprenticeship. He took an interest in the stables, and resolved to hunt when the season for doing so should come round, though he smiled not altogether agreeably when he thought of the then inevitable meeting with his neighbours, and the feelings with which they might regard his appearance in the field.

Distasteful and uncongenial as the whole life was to him, there was, besides, one special circumstance which rendered the atmosphere even more oppressive than it might otherwise

have been, and this was the presence of Dorothy and her governess. Whatever had been the drawbacks of the life he had hitherto led, it had at least possessed the advantage of entire and absolute liberty; and the sense that he formed one of a household, and that others in some measure depended upon him, was irksome to him in the extreme.

It is true that he saw but little of them. His breakfast was served to him alone, long after Miss Hare and her pupil had disposed of theirs and were deep in the studies of the day, and he never made his appearance at luncheon; but still occasions would arise which necessarily brought them into contact, and to Gilbert those occasions were among the most prominent of the lesser trials of his life.

Miss Hare was a woman of between forty and fifty, sharp-featured and light-haired. She was highly educated, furnished with many

diplomas, and enjoyed a high sense of her own dignity. To her, no less than to his entire surroundings, Gilbert's history and antecedents were well known, and upon her acquaintance with them she had carefully regulated her manners and behaviour with regard to him. She prided herself upon being a woman of the world, well versed in its manners and customs, its severities and indulgences. She had lived in 'good families' and mixed in good society; and she recognised the fact that it was no less due to herself than to the guardian of her pupil that she should treat him with uniform civility and politeness, whilst never for one moment forgetting his position, or failing to remember that she—Miss Hare—the former instructress of the present Lady Sherstone, of the Ladies Colinson, and others of equally noble birth and exalted station, was making a sacrifice of no small importance in remaining

on in a family the head of which was a man disgraced in the eyes of the world and of society.

She had even seriously considered within herself whether it might not be her wisest course to relinquish the charge of Dorothy's education upon her father's death, and the changes therefrom ensuing, her doubts and scruples having been materially increased by Gilbert's decision to live at Sandmoor, and the subsequent change in the household. All things considered, however, she had decided upon remaining. She had been with Dorothy some three or four years; was in some degree attached to the girl, who had indeed responded admirably to the care and training she had bestowed upon her; and she told herself—taking somewhat the same view as Lady Courtney of Gilbert's probable influence upon his sister—that it was now more than ever important that she should remain to watch

over her. She was also well paid, and comfortably situated, and—as is usual with us all—the lower and unacknowledged motives were not without their effect in deciding her to allow the higher to determine her course. So she remained on at Sandmoor.

Gilbert, for his part, had from the first detested the woman. The estimable qualities which she doubtless possessed were not such as had much value in his eyes, and she was hopelessly deficient in all those which he looked upon as most essential. She had never had any pretensions to good looks, and years had not improved the sharp and meagre character of her face; her voice was metallic, her manners precise, and to crown all she prided herself upon her powers of conversation. On the occasions upon which they met, Verschoyle was not permitted to confine himself to the commonplaces suggested by the weather, the garden, the horses.

Subjects such as these were beneath the range of Miss Hare's intellect, although under the circumstances there was a certain difficulty in supplying their places with others. Half amused, half provoked, Gilbert was conscious that his antecedents were always before his sister's governess, and governed and directed her choice of topics.

In what might have been supposed to furnish at least one subject in common—little Dorothy, that is—her brother had never attempted to assume the slightest interest. He rather disliked the child, although he intended to do his duty by her. She had been placed in Miss Hare's charge by her father, who presumably had had his own reasons—occult though they appeared—for the selection; and there for the time the matter ended, so far as Gilbert was concerned.

Dorothy, on the contrary, had, for her part,

begun to take a certain interest in her brother, traceable, it may be, to the fact that he took absolutely none in her—such neglect being a new experience to Miss Verschoyle, who in her father's lifetime had been, and considered herself, a somewhat important personage. It is also possible that another circumstance was not without its influence even upon a mind so well balanced as Dorothy's.

‘Don't you think Gilbert is handsome?’ she asked her governess one day, pausing to put the question in the middle of grappling with a problem of Euclid.

Miss Hare looked up from her knitting, surprise and a certain disapproval visible in her countenance.

‘Your brother?’ she asked. ‘Really, Dorothy, I have never considered the question.’

‘Haven't you?’ returned Miss Verschoyle, with composure. ‘Well, now that you do, don't you think him good-looking?’

‘I believe he would be considered so,’ said Miss Hare, with caution. ‘Had you not better continue your work, my dear?’

Dorothy did so, but with less application than was usual with her. She had taken to reflecting upon her ill-conditioned brother of late, and perhaps feeling vaguely aggrieved at his entire indifference to herself.

Miss Hare, for her part, had she answered the child’s question with frankness, would have said that Gilbert looked exactly what might have been expected. He was good-looking, no doubt, but it was the face of a man who had lived every day of his life, and, as Miss Hare would have probably added, had not lived it well. Perhaps she was not entirely wrong.

Gilbert had had one visitor since his arrival at home. Whatever view others might take as to their own course of action, the Rev.

Jonathan Erskine (called by his intimates Johnny) had felt it no part of the duty of the vicar of the parish to turn his back upon any sinner, of however black a dye, who chose to take up his abode in it. He might be sorry that he was there, or wish that he had kept away ; but being there and being his parishioner, it was clearly not for him to hang back from the acquaintance. Mr. Erskine was, as has been said, a cheery, honest little fellow, who had taken to the Church as he would probably have taken to the army or to doctoring, or to any other profession that had been presented to him from his boyhood upwards as his future career ; and having done so, he was determined to do his duty by it in much the same spirit as he would have done it by any other. He was not, it was true, a particularly spiritual man, nor had he any exalted ideas of the sacerdotal office or of his own dignity ; but he was a parson, and

was neither ashamed of his profession nor inclined to shirk its duties. He did not take any specially large or wide views on the subject. He would have said, had he been asked, that he was put into that particular parish to try and make the souls of its inhabitants better, their bodies more comfortable, than they would otherwise have been; and if he was not particularly sanguine of success in either department, if poverty, destitution, and want still seemed to him to exist in much the same proportion as when he came to the parish, and if there was no very perceptible improvement in its spiritual condition, he still stood manfully to his guns, doing his best and not too much cast down by his failures.

He preached short and cheerful sermons, from which the villagers, of which his congregation was mainly composed, went away feeling more kindly towards man and more grateful towards God, even though they com-

pared the new parson, sometimes not altogether favourably, with their late vicar.

‘Lor, he ain’t nothing like the Rev. Headley, he ain’t,’ said an old woman once, as she hobbled away after one of his short discourses. ‘The old vicar, he was worth putting one’s bonnet on and coming for to hear. He had something to say, and took his time about it, he did ; but this here young chap, he’s up and down again before you can turn round.’ Mr. Erskine, in fact, for all his kind cheery ways, was to a certain extent a come-down for the parish.

When he had come to call at Sandmoor he had found Gilbert, as usual, alone in the great library, and the look of the place had struck a chill to his kindly heart. He had done his best to be friendly, and though Gilbert had at first not been particularly prompt to respond to what he was disposed not altogether wrongly to regard as professional cordiality,

he thawed by degrees under the influence of Erskine's good-humour.

'A nice little chap, though he is a parson,' had been his mental verdict ; and by the time his visitor rose to take leave he was almost cordial, accompanying him to the door, where his own horse was standing, having just been brought round.

'Do you care about horses?' he asked, in answer to some comment of his guest's. 'Do you ride?'

Mr. Erskine's boyish face fell slightly.

'Not now,' he said. 'I don't keep a horse.'

'Ah,' said Verschoyle, 'I dare say you have not much time on your hands ; but if you ever feel so inclined, I hope you will make use of mine. They are quite at your service.'

'Thanks,' said the other, hesitating. 'It is true—I have not much time. I——'

He had an instinctive sense that to call upon the black sheep was one thing; to accept a favour from him quite another. Perhaps Verschoyle suspected what was passing in his mind; at any rate he did not press his offer.

‘Just as you please,’ he said rather shortly, looking not at him, but at the horse upon whose neck he had laid his hand.

Erskine glanced at him and took his part.

‘But I shall be glad of a mount sometimes,’ he said, as if finishing his former sentence. ‘It would be great pleasure to me to ride again.’

Gilbert’s brow cleared.

‘Well, send round any day you like,’ he said. ‘Are you walking home now?’

‘Not home. I am not at home just now. I am staying for ten days at Mace—Sir Cyril Courtney’s, you know.’

He had spoken without thought, and

coloured violently as he finished. He had hitherto carefully avoided any mention of the neighbours, and he glanced apprehensively at Verschoyle as Sir Cyril's name escaped him, with whose views concerning his present host he was well acquainted.

Gilbert, however, did not notice his confusion. He was thinking of the afternoon, three days ago, when he had driven Eve Carrington to Mace—remembering her as he had seen her last, standing in the light of the setting sun, with her fair face turned towards him, and the hand he had not taken held out.

‘At Mace, are you?’ he said absently. ‘You will have a hot walk, but it is cooler than it was. Good-bye.’

He turned back again into the library, forgetting the horse that stood waiting at the door. He had liked his guest, and his visit had broken the dreary monotony of the day ;

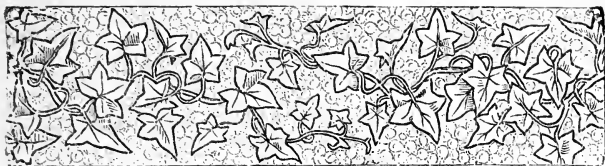
but he was not thinking of him as he stood looking absently out of the window.

Involuntarily and uncalled for, some words had sprung to his memory which—though he was not a reader of poetry in a general way—he had met with long ago :

‘ If Maud was all that she seemed,
And her smile was all that I dreamed,
Then life were not so bitter,
But a smile might make it sweet.’

If ?—Gilbert Verschoyle’s reflections generally ended with a note of interrogation. He roused himself, and went out.





CHAPTER IX.

A DAY or two after Mr. Erskine's visit, Gilbert was passing through the hall on the way to the door, where the dogcart was waiting, when he met Dorothy wandering about with a somewhat disconsolate appearance. Contrary to his custom, he stopped and addressed her.

‘What, idle, Dorothy!’ he said. ‘What has become of your studies? Has Miss Hare’s vigilance relaxed? I thought you were always in the schoolroom at this hour.’

‘So I am—from four to six, generally,’ answered the child listlessly. ‘But Miss Hare has a headache to-day.’

‘Why don’t you go out then?’ said Gilbert. ‘I should take advantage of her indisposition, however much we may regret it, and it is a beautiful afternoon.’

‘She won’t let me go out alone,’ said Dorothy, glancing rather wistfully through the open door at the sunshine outside. ‘At least not unless I take Briggs’—her maid—‘and that is dull.’

Gilbert paused, good-nature and reluctance to be bored struggling within him. The first conquered.

‘Would you like to come with me?’ he asked. ‘I will take you for a drive if you like.’

‘In the dogcart?’ Dorothy brightened visibly, but hesitated. ‘I should like it ; but I don’t know whether Miss Hare——’

Gilbert interrupted her with the shadow of a smile.

‘I don’t think we need trouble Miss Hare,’

he said. 'Did you not say she had a headache?—it would be a pity to disturb her. You can come if you like.'

Carelessly as he spoke, for the first time there was a slight assumption of authority in his tone, and Dorothy's shrewd little mind noticed and half resented it, even whilst she longed to avail herself of his offer. Perhaps, too, she, like Mr. Erskine, felt doubtful as to accepting a favour at his hands. If so, however, her hesitation did not last. The temptation was too strong; the sun outside, the dogcart and the great black horse together overpowered her scruples, and for once Dorothy's conscience allowed itself to be lulled to sleep.

'After all, it is Gilbert who is my guardian,' said the youthful casuist to herself, as she ran upstairs to get ready, passing the door of the room in which Miss Hare was lying down with suspicious speed and caution.

Gilbert, for his part, had already repented

of the impulse of good-nature to which he had yielded. As he drove along by his sister's side he felt not only, as he had anticipated, bored, but even somewhat embarrassed. He knew nothing of children—if, indeed, he had done so, his acquaintance with them would have been of little assistance to him, for Dorothy was most unchildlike—and he was completely at a loss how to make conversation.

‘Do you like living in the country?’ he asked, when the topic of the weather had been exhausted—it had afforded so little variety of late that it presented a particularly barren field for remark. ‘Don’t you find it dull?’

Perhaps he had a lingering hope that Dorothy’s answer might furnish him with a plausible pretext for sending her—with or without Miss Hare—to live in a more exciting locality. If so, however, he was disappointed.

‘No, I don’t find it dull,’ said Dorothy,

surprised at the question. 'I have always lived here, you know.'

'Ah, no doubt that makes a difference,' allowed Verschoyle. 'And you wouldn't like a school better, where you would have other children—other girls, I mean,' correcting himself hastily—'as companions?'

'Not at all,' said Miss Verschoyle, negating the suggestion with prompt decision. Her suspicions were aroused, and she was at once on the defensive. 'Besides, only second-class girls are sent to school.'

'Is that so?' said Gilbert carelessly, but with a shade of sarcasm his sister did not detect. 'Then of course it would be out of the question. I know so little of these matters. I only thought it seemed a dull life for you here; but if you like it——' He shrugged his shoulders.

'I never found it dull till—till——' Dorothy broke off.

‘Till my father’s death—or till my return?’ Gilbert smiled, partly divining her meaning, and more sure of it as he saw the slight confusion of her look. ‘I suppose it *has* made a change.’

Dorothy sighed, but made no direct answer.

‘I used to go to parties,’ she said regretfully. ‘Lawn-tennis and garden-parties. Of course I was not grown up, but papa didn’t mind. Sometimes he used to take me himself, and sometimes—to the Courtneys and people we knew well—I used to go alone. It was nice,’ finished Dorothy, her tongue unloosed by the remembrance of past delights.

‘Poor Dorothy!’ observed her brother, with careless sympathy. ‘Well, you can go to parties still, can’t you? or have there been none lately?’

She looked up with eagerness, whilst

yet some unusual embarrassment made itself apparent in her manner.

‘Lady Courtney has one this week,’ she said quickly; ‘but——’

‘She has not invited you?’ asked her brother with a smile. ‘That was unkind.’

‘It is not that,’ said the girl, hesitating again. ‘She did say she hoped I would come; but Miss Hare did not know—she was not sure—whether you would wish me to go.’

‘I!’ Verschoyle raised his eyebrows. ‘What possible objection could I have?’ he asked. ‘You say your father allowed you to go, and—is it because you are in mourning?’ he said, as a possible solution of the problem struck him.

‘No—not that,’ said the girl. ‘It is not a large party—only a few people, or Lady Courtney would not have asked me; but——’

‘Well, what is it?’ Gilbert spoke rather impatiently as she paused again. ‘What possible reason could I have to object?’ he added peremptorily.

At last it came out.

‘It was because *you* had not been asked.’

Dorothy spoke low, and flushed up to the roots of her pale hair. She was in ordinary matters a cool and composed little person; but even she felt she was trenching upon a delicate subject.

Gilbert laughed shortly.

‘Pray don’t hesitate on that account,’ he said. ‘It would be hard indeed if you were to suffer for my iniquities.’

He touched the horse rather sharply, and when he spoke again it was on a different subject.

The day was cloudless; but a slight breeze was blowing on the high ground, and it was not so overpoweringly hot as it had been of

late. They had driven some miles, and had gained the top of a gorse-covered eminence which commanded the show view of the neighbourhood. There had been silence between them for some time, when Dorothy made an exclamation.

‘See, Gilbert! there is the Mace carriage waiting. They must have got out to see the view. Ah, there is Lady Courtney—do you see?—at the edge of the hill, and some people with her. May I get down and ask her what day it is to be—her party, I mean? I can’t remember whether it is to-morrow.’

Gilbert assented and pulled up his horse, ashamed of his first impulse, which had been to refuse. The child clambered down and ran off across the heath and gorse to where bonnets and parasols appeared on the brow of the hill.

Verschoyle sat holding the fidgety horse, without turning his head in the direction in which she had disappeared. He did not see

that a figure had detached itself from the group for which Dorothy was making, and was crossing the heath towards the Courtney carriage, which stood waiting a few yards from the place where the dogcart was drawn up. Something had gone wrong with the harness, and he had got down to set it right, when at the sound of steps approaching along the path by which his sister had disappeared, he spoke without turning or looking round.

‘Wait a minute,’ he said; ‘I will help you up directly;’ then, receiving no answer, he turned quickly, with a sudden suspicion that it had not been Dorothy whom he had addressed, to see Eve Carrington standing before him.

She had come along the narrow path between the high bushes of yellow gorse, and now stood in apparent hesitation whether to greet him or to pass on without speaking. She had not forgotten the evening when he

had refused to recognise her. Now, however, he started and lifted his hat as he spoke in hasty apology.

‘Miss Carrington!’ he said, ‘I beg your pardon; I was waiting for my sister, and hearing your footsteps I thought it was she.’

‘Yes,’ said Eve vaguely. ‘She is with Lady Courtney, I think. I met her. I came—Lady Courtney wanted her parasol.’

‘Ah yes—the sun is still hot, is it not?’ Gilbert glanced towards the carriage, and then bent once more over the harness, as if to conclude the interview. Eve paused before, with a sudden impulse, she spoke again.

‘Mr. Verschoyle,’ she said, with a slight tremor in her voice—‘Mr. Verschoyle, why did you not recognise me when we met?’

He lifted his head and looked steadily at her. A faint flush had risen to her face, her bare hands were locked nervously together, but her eyes met his.

‘When?’ he asked.

‘On Wednesday. You saw me—I know it—when I was driving with Lady Courtney.’

For a moment he hesitated; but if he had meant to deny the charge, he changed his mind.

‘I should have thought that question scarcely needed an answer,’ he replied slowly. He was grave, perhaps a little cold, but there was nothing offensive in his manner.

‘And you mean I should not have asked it?’ she said quickly. ‘I did not mean to annoy you; but I could not bear that—that you should think—I am sorry,’ she finished rather incoherently.

‘You have not annoyed me,’ he said more gently, now for the first time smiling. ‘And I will, since you wish it, promise to know you for the future when——’ he corrected himself—‘*should* we meet again.’

He was looking full at her, as if taking advantage of the opportunity to study her face. As he did so, his own softened. Yet after that one look he turned away.

‘ Good-bye, Miss Carrington,’ he said, gently but decidedly. ‘ I do not suppose it is likely that we shall often meet ; but I will not again—forget you.’

If there was a double meaning underlying his words, lightly spoken as they were, Eve did not stop to consider it. That on the surface was plain enough. Neither did she pause to consider the wisdom of her next words—she, indeed, had but little of the wisdom of the children of this world. She saw in him, not Gilbert Verschoye, almost a stranger, and moreover a stranger of indifferent character, in whose favour she had nothing to go upon save her own groundless conjectures ; but a man whom the world had chosen—as she believed unjustly—to dishonour ; a man to

whom no welcoming word had been spoken, no welcoming hand held out, and again she spoke rashly, inconsiderately.

‘ Will you bring your sister to see me—when I am at home again ?’

She had forgotten Patricia for the time, and all that would make his presence, at Nortons in especial, inexpedient and undesirable. As to any other unwisdom of her request, any possible construction that he might put upon her invitation, the idea did not so much as cross her mind. Such suspicions were slow to occur to her, and Gilbert Verschoyle, with all his faults, was not a man with whom it was easy to associate the idea of an unworthy vanity. She had not misjudged him. He read her meaning, with the exception, perhaps, of her rash confidence in his innocence, as clearly as if she had put it into words. He smiled rather sadly.

‘ You will bring your sister to see me ?’ she had said.

‘I think—not,’ he answered. ‘You will not misunderstand me when I say that it will be better not.’

‘It will not,’ she answered. ‘Do not refuse me.’

He looked surprised at her persistence.

‘If I did not refuse you,’ he said with a half-smile, ‘one day you would be sorry that you had asked me ; one day, perhaps, you would say—not to me, I know—that I should have done better if I had not taken you at your word.’

Long afterwards his words came back to her; but now she put them away with a sort of soft impatience.

‘That is my own affair,’ she said.

He looked at her fixedly.

‘*Is* it your own affair?’ he asked. ‘Are you sure that there is no one that has a right to say that it is theirs?’

She lifted her head gently yet proudly, and looked him straight in the face.

‘No one,’ she answered. ‘Will you come?’

‘Since you wish it—yes,’ he said at last.

‘Then good-bye.’ She held out her firm, slight hand. This time he did not refuse it.

‘Good-bye.’

Another moment, and she was gone.

‘Have I kept you too long?’ asked Dorothy, running up a few minutes later, her tongue unloosened by excitement. ‘Lady Courtney was there, and some other ladies ; they are sitting on the heath looking at the view. The party is to-morrow, so it was lucky I asked. Some people are staying in the house. Miss Carrington is there.’

‘Do you know her?’ asked Gilbert carelessly.

‘I have seen her at Mace. Papa knew her uncle—Mr. Carrington, who died—but it was too far off to go and call often ; Nortons is nine miles from us. She is often with the Courtneys. She was to have married the one

who died—Mr. Harry Courtney—long ago, and now they say she will marry Sir Cyril,’ concluded Dorothy shrewdly.

Gilbert made no response, although he was not inattentive to what she said, and the child ran on in her sharp, worldly way.

‘It would be a very good arrangement, so everybody says, and Lady Courtney would be pleased, she is so fond of Miss Carrington. Ah, there is Sir Cyril. He must be going to meet them.’

* * * * *

Half an hour later the party on the heath were still there, watching the sun sink lower and lower and the lights change upon the opposite hills. Sir Cyril and Lord Ralston had walked over to join them, and they were scattered about upon the heather.

‘I suppose that was Verschöyle whom we met just now driving with his sister,’ observed Cyril, when a pause had occurred in the con-

versation. 'I used to know him when we were boys, though he must be four or five years older than I am, but I should not have recognised him.'

'Yes—Dorothy ran across to speak to me,' answered Lady Courtney. 'She said he was with her.'

Patricia had started slightly as Verschoyle's name was introduced, and glanced rather apprehensively at her sister—she never quite knew what to expect of Eve; but the girl was silent. Lord Ralston, however, spoke.

'Ah, the man we passed on the hill?' he said. 'What an inconvenience it is for the neighbourhood when that sort of thing happens! Something of the same kind, only not so bad, took place in my own. A man with one of the largest estates in the county died, and some far-off cousin inherited—a man whose father, I believe, was a retail grocer. The son is respectable, as far as I

know ; but there is one of the largest houses about practically closed. One had to leave cards upon him, but it was impossible to do more.'

'At any rate we have the advantage of you there,' observed Sir Cyril, laying his head lazily back on the heather. 'It is *not* necessary to leave cards upon Mr. Verschoyle.'

Eve moved uneasily. She had picked a sprig of heather and stripped it of its bells, which lay upon her palm in a purple heap. She was struggling with a desire to speak—to say that she was not ashamed to know Gilbert Verschoyle, yet a feeling of loyalty to her sister kept her silent. She could not say anything before Lady Courtney, or, worst of all, Lord Ralston, which might lead to the discovery of the relations upon which he had once stood to Patricia. Yet she felt she could not remain there hearing him discussed, and keeping silence.

‘Will you come a little way with me, Cyril?’ she asked, rising as she spoke. ‘I want to see if the white heather still grows in that hollow away to the left.’

He sprang up gladly, and they walked away together, whilst Lady Courtney looked after them with satisfaction legible on her face.

Eve was silent at first, and when she spoke it was in a low hurried tone.

‘I know Mr. Verschoyle,’ she said. She had a dim sense that it was due to Cyril, her friend, that he should hear it. With him, at least, Patricia’s secret, even if he should guess it, would be safe.

‘What do you mean?’ said her companion sharply. ‘*You* know him?’

‘Yes,’ she answered, speaking steadily now that she had begun. ‘I became acquainted with him through—an accident.’

Cyril was thoroughly roused.

‘It was a most unfortunate one,’ he answered, his face clouded with vexation. ‘What was it?’

‘I can’t tell you. It involves—some one else’s affairs.’

Cyril asked no more; he probably knew enough of Mrs. Ross to have a shrewd suspicion as to whose affairs were likely to be involved. He walked by Eve’s side in moody silence, his face over-clouded.

‘Cyril,’ she said suddenly, ‘do you mean what you said just now? do you mean that one isolated act—a criminal one if you will—should shut the doors of society on a man for ever?’ She knew that to bring forward her own conviction of Verschoyle’s innocence, in absence of even his own denial of guilt, would be worse than useless; but surely, even from another point of view she might plead his cause.

‘I do,’ said Courtney doggedly. ‘Society

has its duties, and one of them is to keep cheats and scoundrels out of it.'

His temper was ruffled, and he spoke hotly, angered at the very fact that, however blamelessly, she had been drawn into an acquaintance, slight as no doubt it was, with such a man; more angered that she should set herself to plead his cause. Eve, for her part, gentle and unresentful as she was, flushed with anger at his tone.

'*Are* they kept out?' she asked, with an unusual touch of sarcasm. Across her mind, little prone to thinking evil though it was, had flashed the thought that in that society to which Cyril had alluded some sinners, at least, were permitted to go unreprieved by that very conventional code which protected it so jealously from others.

'What do you mean?' he asked shortly. 'If it is that there are certain offences that society has agreed to pardon, whilst it

punishes others perhaps from a moral point of view not more black, I do not wish to deny it. I had not the framing of the laws of society, and I am not bound to justify them. They have been made, and it is my duty to carry them out.'

'And you do not count Christian forgiveness and charity a duty?' she asked.

'I do not,' said Sir Cyril, 'not, at least, in the sense you mean. Forgiveness is for personal wrongs. If I see fit to forgive an injury done to myself, I have a right to do so. I have no right to injure and insult society at large by condoning a sin against it.'

'Then you mean that there is no restoration for sinners—on earth?' she added under her breath, looking over to the distant hills with eyes out of which anger had already died, banished by pain.

'Of the kind you mean, none.' Cyril spoke again with a touch of sternness. Eve made

no answer. Words, which she would not quote, were floating dreamily through her brain; words which spoke of a possible restoration and pardon—even for sinners. But of Gilbert she spoke no more.

‘There is the white heather,’ she said, rousing herself. ‘In the hollow, Cyril, do you see? Will you get it for me?’

Only when they were returning a few minutes later to join the others did he recur once more to the subject.

‘Don’t think me too hard, Eve,’ he said. ‘If I said more than I ought, it was because I could not bear the idea of your having been brought into any sort of contact with such a man as Verschoye. Forgive me if I was angry.’





CHAPTER X.

‘**A**ND you are sure you don’t mind being left alone?’

Mrs. Ross was speaking. It was about a week since she and her sister, to whom her question was addressed, had returned from Mace, and the inquiry bore reference to a certain invitation which had reached Patricia that morning; and had, as she rightly conceived, a distinct bearing upon the hopes and expectations which had been raised in her mind during her stay at Lady Courtney’s. Her intimacy with Lord Ralston had continued to progress most satisfactorily; but he was a cautious man, who objected to anything which

bore the stamp or semblance of haste, and nothing had escaped him in actual speech which could be regarded or construed in the light of a pledge. He was not a man to be carried away by impulse, and when he had made his farewell to Mrs. Ross, it was with the gratifying consciousness that, whilst he could look back upon ten days most agreeably spent in her constant society, he had not allowed himself to be compromised in the slightest degree.

The same reflection, however, which had consoled Lord Ralston when deprived of Mrs. Ross's companionship, proved by no means equally comforting to Patricia, and her spirits had been proportionately raised by the unexpected arrival that morning of a letter from a sister of Lord Ralston's, with whom she had had, some years ago, a very slight acquaintanceship, which neither party had cared to develop into anything more intimate, but

from whom she now received a cordial invitation to pay her a visit in the country, with a further intimation that her brother would be probably staying with her at the time. It was, as Mrs. Ross felt, a decided move on the part of his lordship, and she hoped the best from it.

It is true that Patricia wondered a little, in the pauses of the chase, whether the prize was worth the winning; but such doubts as arose she disposed of promptly, telling herself also, what was indubitably true, that should she not now become Lady Ralston, the popular voice would not ascribe it to reluctance on *her* part. No, she had, so she told herself, gone too far to recede; and having thus made up her mind, she was determined to win the game, and to enjoy her success.

Of Gilbert Verschoyle, as having any possible bearing upon her object or her future, she had spoken but once, when Eve had intro-

duced his name. Even now Miss Carrington could not always understand her sister. Perhaps Patricia was right when she said that Eve was slow of comprehension—that she took twice the time of an ordinary person to grasp an idea and make it her own. Certainly she was not quick at doing so. She was what her friends might have called single-minded, and her enemies, had she possessed any, one-sided; deficient, that is, in the acuteness of perception which makes it easy to some to enter into characters entirely different to themselves. She had a mental difficulty in seeing more than one side of a question, or more than one aspect of a truth. She was coming by degrees, slowly and laboriously, to a fairly correct estimate of Patricia; but yet from time to time she was taken by surprise, and paused, as it were, to readjust her ideas with the aid of the fresh light new revelations afforded. With all her gentleness she was

severe in her moral judgments—severe, that is, as to the particular type of character which seemed to her worthless, and to that type she was slowly but surely discovering that her sister's belonged. It was of a kind which, shallow as it was, and easily read by those who held the key to it, was just such an one as presented most difficulties and most problems to her sister. It would have been easier for Eve, in spite of her own purity and innocence, to believe that a soul held a sin than that it held nothing; to believe that the light gaiety of Patricia's heedless talk was a veil for something that lay below than that it was the simple expression of her nature—one of those natures to which it is not difficult to believe that Providence, whilst bestowing upon it other gifts great and small, has denied a soul.

On the present occasion, when Patricia had been expounding her plans and hopes with careless and characteristic openness, there was

a pause in the conversation whilst Eve pondered.

‘And six months ago you were to have married Mr. Verschoyle,’ she said musingly.

‘My dear Eve’—Mrs. Ross spoke with some impatience—‘what an inconvenient memory you have! Do try to forget that unfortunate episode.’

‘Have *you* forgotten it?’ asked the girl.

‘Except when you insist upon reminding me of it, certainly,’ said Mrs. Ross, laughing lightly. ‘Just now I am incapable of conjugating the verb *aimer* in either the present or the past. *J’aimerais* Lord Ralston as soon as ever he asks me to do so; and under these circumstances even you, my dear Eve, will perceive that it is, to say the least, undesirable to go back upon the past.’

Eve had said no more, and the discussion had drifted away. This morning, as they sat at breakfast, Mrs. Smythe’s invitation naturally supplied the topic of conversation.

‘You don’t mind being left alone? I feel as if I was behaving badly in deserting you, but as Mrs. Smythe’s letter is so cordial it seems a pity to refuse.’

‘Pray don’t do so upon my account,’ returned Eve. ‘I am used to being alone, and I do not dislike it.’

Mrs. Ross laughed again, quite unaffronted by her sister’s candour.

‘I sometimes think,’ she said, ‘when I am in your company, Eve, that I have never heard unvarnished truth before. No doubt other people would have felt as little regret at my departure, but then they would have thought it necessary to assume what they did *not* feel. No,’ as the girl attempted an apology, ‘I know you meant no offence, and I am not the least hurt. To return to Mrs. Smythe—I had quite forgotten I had met her till Lord Ralston reminded me of it. She was rather a dull woman. I imagine intellectual

brilliancy is not a characteristic of the family,' remarked Mrs. Ross easily; 'but still, under the circumstances, I think I may as well accept her hospitality, do not you?'

'If you mean to marry her brother—yes,' answered Eve slowly.

'And that we may consider a settled fact,' said Mrs. Ross rather impatiently. 'And I may leave Kit here?'

'Of course—if you like. You are not taking him with you?'

'No, certainly not. For one thing, he is not invited. I dare say they don't know such a person exists. And, besides, a child is always in the way.'

Eve looked at her meditatively.

'You don't care for him,' she observed, rather as an undisputable fact than as a question.

Patricia did not deny it. In domestic life at least her frankness counterbalanced many

of her demerits, and went far to disarm criticism.

‘No,’ she said. ‘I know it is a received maxim—one of those I was speaking of the other day—that mothers should invariably be fond of their children, but it is no more infallible than the rest. I dare say I should have liked him if he had been different—a pretty little girl, or even boy, whom it would have paid to dress; but Kit, from a baby in arms, was always unsympathetic. I often wonder why I should have had such an unprepossessing child. He takes after his father’s family. All the Rosses have his sandy hair and light eyes. And then he is so much too sharp. I really believe,’ ended his mother with irritation, ‘there is not a thing which that child doesn’t know, and he is only seven years old.’

‘Poor Kit!’ observed Eve. She did not herself, it is true, like her nephew, and would,

indeed, have been ready to endorse most of his mother's criticisms; but, nevertheless, it seemed to her a hard lot that the child should grow up thus uncared for.

‘Oh, you needn't pity him,’ said Mrs. Ross, ‘He gets all he wants.’

‘Except a little love.’

‘Which he can very well dispense with. No, my dear Eve, believe me, neither Kit nor his mother will make exorbitant demands in that line.’

Eve did not continue the discussion, but it recurred to her mind when, about ten days later, on her return from seeing his mother off to pay her visit to Lord Ralston's relations, she encountered the child in the hall. She paused and sat down on a couch, drawing him to her.

‘Where were you this afternoon, Kit?’ she asked. ‘Your mother was looking for you to say good-bye.’

‘Was she?’ returned the boy indifferently, wriggling himself free from the arm she had put round him, not presumably because he was in haste to go elsewhere, but simply from a natural love of independence. Eve made no effort to detain him, and having obtained his liberty he appeared not unwilling to continue the conversation from a safe distance. ‘I was looking at Joe’s rabbits,’ he observed. ‘He’s got three.’

‘It was a pity you were out of the way,’ pursued Eve. ‘Your mother is gone.’

‘I thought so,’ returned Mrs. Ross’s son, with no semblance of regret. ‘I wish Marie was gone too. I wish Marie was dead!’

‘Do you?’ asked Eve, somewhat startled by the energy of the aspiration. ‘Why?’ She had a suspicion that Kit did not meet with overmuch kindness at the hands of his nurse. But whatever were the facts, he was too discreet to reveal them, only glancing at

his aunt with a knowing look in his light-blue eyes.

‘She’s no good,’ he said. ‘I wish she was dead.’

Eve asked no more questions, and attempted no remonstrance, only sighing as she rose and went upstairs. She was too conscious of her own lack of affection for the child to feel herself entitled either to blame or to try to improve him. Miss Carrington was no believer in the good influence of kindness dissociated from love; and perhaps she was right, though it is a doctrine that, universally accepted, would be productive of some inconveniences for the world, and would leave more than one philanthropist with idle hands.

She forgot her nephew, however, without loss of time as she mounted the stairs and went to her room. She had just remembered, in connection perhaps with Patricia’s departure, that it was already more than a fortnight

since her return from Mace, and that Gilbert Verschoyle had not fulfilled his promise of visiting Nortons. Perhaps he had repented of having yielded, and did not mean to come. She was sorry if it were so, and yet she was content. She had done her best, had shown him—she could not have done so more clearly—that with her, at least, the opinion of the world and the verdict of society had no weight, and she was content to let the matter rest, as one with which she had no further concern. Eve's was no restless, active spirit of partisanship; her temper of mind was the direct opposite of those who conceive it to be their mission to reform the world, or to set right the abuses of society. In Gilbert's case it was simply that an injustice, a wrong, had been forced upon her notice, driven home to her the more by her sister's conduct; and pity for the man and indignation for the wrong done to him had joined hands to induce her—

it might be on an unwise impulse—to set herself, in so far as it lay in her power to do so, to rectify that injustice and repair that wrong—feeling all the time how miserably inadequate were the means which lay at her disposal for the purpose. She had performed her act of reparation ; but that being done, she was content to let the matter rest. No sting of mortified vanity that her advances had been declined rankled within her ; she had simply done her part, and the matter was, as far as she was concerned, closed and done with. She had, with this reflection, dismissed the subject from her mind, when Jones knocked at her door.

‘Mr. Verschoyle, miss. He is in the drawing-room.’

The announcement came in curious apt response to her reflections, giving them, as it were, another colouring. She was glad that he had come. She knew now, what in her charity she had not allowed to herself before,

that it would have been churlish and discourteous on his part had he, after all, rejected her overtures; yet, for the first time, she was conscious of a doubt of their wisdom. As she lingered in her room, not hastening her movements as she divested herself of her jacket and hat, there flashed across her mind the recollection of their first meeting in the very room in which he was now awaiting her, of the question he had put to Patricia, and of her answer. Would not the remembrance, she asked herself, of that day be with him now even as it was with her, filling her with a painful sense of shame, somewhat as if it had been she herself who had dealt him the insult, since it had been offered by her sister and in her house? Had she had any right to insist upon his exposing himself to the painful associations connected with that scene? Her hands trembled a little as she put them up and smoothed the heavy hair on her forehead.

Yet, when a few minutes later she entered the drawing-room, she betrayed no confusion or shyness, and her manner was as quiet as usual. If it had been otherwise, his greeting was well calculated to set her at her ease. It was that of an ordinary and not an intimate acquaintance, and was perfectly free from embarrassment.

‘I should have given myself the pleasure of calling before,’ he said, ‘but a variety of causes combined to prevent me. Also I did not know how soon you might be at home.’

‘I have been back a fortnight,’ she answered, as she took his hand. ‘I am glad to see you. You have not brought your sister?’

‘Dorothy? No. She was to receive a music lesson this afternoon. Her education is being conducted on the strictest principles, and it is not often that I take courage to disturb them.’

‘You must bring her another day,’ said Eve kindly. ‘It must be a solitary life for her, poor child.’

She does not seem to object to it,’ said her brother carelessly. ‘I hinted to her the other day that it might be dull, but she treated the idea with contempt; and if she likes it——’

He shrugged his shoulders as he changed the subject, and the talk went on as it might have done between comparative strangers who were as yet ignorant of each other’s tastes or habits, and had, moreover, no mutual acquaintances to discuss. If at first there was some slight awkwardness due to the sense which will make itself felt under such circumstances—the consciousness, namely, that there are subjects to be avoided, ground which it would be dangerous to break—it wore away quickly before his conversancy with the world and with general topics of conversation, and her

gentleness and grace. Perhaps, indeed, the very absence of surface subjects of mutual interest necessitated, or at least led to, the discussion of ones more personal, which would have naturally belonged to a longer acquaintanceship or a greater degree of intimacy. The preliminaries were, so to speak, more difficult than what would follow. By the time that half an hour had passed, Eve felt that she knew him almost well.

‘How much you have seen!’ she observed, when he had been describing a scene he had witnessed in Spain with the peculiar vividness of description which was one of his gifts.

‘Not more than most men of my age, I imagine,’ he answered. ‘There are different sides of life, of course. I have seen a good deal of the world, if you take that to mean different places and countries—the outside part of it, in fact—but that is natural to a man who has had no settled home for eleven

years of his life. There is another side of which most men have had more experience than I. I know next to nothing of what is called English society, and I have not a single friend or even intimate acquaintance in the world. Such a confession is an adverse criticism on the man who makes it, is it not?' he said, reading her face with a half-smile.

'Perhaps so,' she answered absently, as she pictured to herself the life to which his words pointed. He smiled at the unconscious candour of her reply.

'It is not so bad as it looks,' he said. 'I have had, you know—disadvantages. Letting alone others, my father disliked me, and my stepmother detested me. At the same time I am bound to say that in my future career I did my best to justify them.'

He was speaking with apparent ease and with a touch of sarcasm, yet the impression was conveyed to Eve's mind—she knew not

how—that he was forcing himself to trench upon the subject which he would have naturally avoided. Was it bravado, to prove to himself that he did not fear it, or was it the instinct which leads to pressure upon a sensitive nerve?

Eve was silent. How could she answer him—she, a stranger, who had no right even to offer him sympathy? How could she tell him that if his life had not been what it might have been—and looking at his face, and listening to his careless clever talk, though there had been no recurrence of the tone that had been offensive in it during their *tête-à-tête* drive, she had a growing conviction that it had not—that part at least of the blame rested with those who had branded him with a false accusation, and sent him out to fight his battle with life thus weighted and shackled? There was a short silence, and then he moved to go.

‘I may come again?’ he said as he stood up; adding with a smile, ‘this time it is I who ask. And yet I do not abandon my first position—that the day may come when you will say that I should have done better to have stayed away.’

‘No,’ said the girl.

He had smiled as he spoke, but she was perfectly grave.

‘Is that a promise?’ he asked.

‘Yes—a promise,’ she answered, as she drew her hand gently away.

Five minutes later, when she passed again through the hall, Kit was still there, playing at marbles on the tiled floor. Moved by an impulse, she stooped and kissed him, thinking of another unloved childhood. How much of our pity is made up of mingled motives! Kit, for his part, looked up with quick mistrust, doubting whether the unusual demonstration of affection might not be intended as the preface for

some fresh demand upon his obedience. His suspicions, however, were allayed as Eve turned away, and he went back, feeling only a slight natural surprise, to his interrupted game.





CHAPTER XI.

IT was August, an August of cloudless dewy mornings, when the moors and lawns lay covered and sparkling, for those who were up early enough to see them, with gossamer, when the sun shone on uninterruptedly all day from its rising, veiled by the thin blue heat-mists of the morning, to its going down in the purple and gold which the stretches of heather and gorse below seemed to reflect and intensify.

It was weather which makes all exertion, whether physical or mental, difficult, which seems to invite to absolute idleness, inclining us to select our lightest literature and our

coolest dresses, and to put off any fatiguing duties, any serious thoughts or disquieting reflections which may present themselves for our consideration, to some more convenient season. When Nature is doing her very best to please us, and when it is, moreover, certain, at least under English skies, that she will not continue her good offices long, it would be churlish and ungrateful in us—so we are apt half unconsciously to still any scruples of conscience which may arise—not to profit to the utmost by the gifts which she bestows with a lavish if capricious hand, or to let a restless spirit of speculation or inquiry or foreboding put us out of harmony with her serene tranquillity. She has laid her commands upon us to sleep and take our rest, and we obey, conscious that the season for waking and taking thought for the morrow is never far distant, but willing for the time to forget it. Afterwards, when the east wind has come

back, when rain has followed the sunshine, when, in fact, summer is over, then it will be time to reflect and to speculate—to consider, it may be, that ‘summer is past, the winter is come, and we are not saved.’ Such seasons there are in the spiritual and moral as well as in the natural world—times when a lull has come, as it were, in life, and we accept almost necessarily, sometimes unconsciously, sometimes with gladness, a respite from all troublesome or perplexing questions, and allow ourselves to float unresistingly on Nature’s surface, forgetting that the tide may be sweeping us away during our inaction, so that when at last we rouse ourselves to take up the oars once more, it is possible that we may look round with startled eyes to find ourselves between unfamiliar banks, and swept along by a current of which we were altogether unsuspecting. Thus, in some measure, had it been with Eve Carrington.

It was already more than three weeks since Mrs. Ross's departure, but she had as yet shown no disposition to return. She had gone on from Mrs. Smythe's to pay a second visit in the neighbourhood, from whence she was to go back to spend another week at the house of Lord Ralston's sister. Her letters were not abundant, nor when they arrived did they convey much information; yet her sister gathered from what she said that she was fairly satisfied with her visit to Mrs. Smythe, although perhaps a little impatient for the final *dénouement* of what she called, with a touch of humour, her romance.

Affairs had in fact progressed favourably, though his lordship still refused to be hurried. As some one—presumably a friend—said of him once, the good steed caution had, in his case, fairly got the better of his master and run away with him; and the same critic had sagely added, that the course that animal

takes when he once gets his head is apt to lead to the land of nowhere. For the present, however, Mrs. Ross had made up her mind to wait the more patiently, as in the interim she was in the enjoyment of an agreeable shooting-party, of a kind decidedly more congenial to her than those which were wont to meet under the auspices of the well-meaning but ponderous Mrs. Smythe.

‘She is a wife and a mother, my dear,’ Mrs. Ross wrote to Eve; ‘need I say more? I hope not, for there is absolutely nothing more to be said.’ In Mrs. Ross’s mouth there could scarcely have been severer condemnation.

The Courtneys were also away, Sir Cyril having gone with much reluctance to keep a long-standing engagement in Scotland; whilst his mother, availing herself of the opportunity of his absence to leave home likewise, was paying a visit to a sister in Kent.

With Mace deserted, Eve was more solitary than usual. Though she was, of course, more or less acquainted with all the neighbours, she had always been a person of few intimate friendships; or perhaps it would be more accurate to say, with the one exception of the Courtneys, of none. Whilst her native gentleness and courtesy prevented her being altogether unpopular, people were accustomed to find an intangible bar, which stood in the way of liking growing into any sentiment more close and familiar; and even those to whom she had been known for the greater part of her life had gradually relinquished the attempt to be intimate with her. She was not consciously or intentionally repellent, but there was something in her habitual reserve, almost amounting to coldness, which discouraged advances; she had few friends, and no constant associates.

She did not miss them; but it might, per-

haps, have been better for her had the life she led been a less lonely one. Solitude, whether of the body or of the mind, and whether self-chosen or enforced, has its dangers as well as its advantages. In Eve, as has been observed before, it had fostered a habit, curious in a nature so devoid of arrogance or presumption, of leaning, to a degree scarcely suspected even by herself, upon her own judgment; and she sometimes forgot that, whilst the tribunal of conscience—whether competent or incompetent—must be the court of final appeal for all and in all cases, it is a moral loss when its causes are decided and its judgments given without jury or counsel.

The three weeks that had gone by since Mrs. Ross left, though gliding smoothly and uneventfully past, had not been unfraught with consequences—consequences which set their mark deeply on Eve Carrington's life.

It had not been many days before Gilbert

Verschoyle had repeated his visit, bringing, this time, his sister with him ; and since then it had come about—neither of them quite knew how—that few days together elapsed without bringing him over to Nortons. At first he would come in only for a few minutes—in the course of his ride, as he would explain with somewhat suspicious care, to leave a book which he had mentioned, or furnished with some other like transparent pretext ; but by degrees he forgot to make excuses for the frequency of his visits, or Eve to expect them, and it came to be almost a matter of course that every two or three days should find him at Nortons, usually in the late afternoons when she was most certain to be at home and alone, sitting with Eve either in the cool shaded drawing-room or loitering together in the warm stillness of the August evenings, or sometimes mounting the hill which rose sharply behind the house to watch the sunset from its summit.

Did Eve know what she was doing?

She told herself afterwards that she had not—that she had never thought of the possible consequences of those summer days, believing herself to have seen in him only a wronged and insulted man for whom the very intensity of her compassion, coupled with her indignation against the world which had so dealt with him, had blinded her to any other feeling with which she might be growing to regard him.

It was not that he spoke much or often of his past, or that he ever voluntarily laid claim to her sympathy on behalf of it. As his intimacy with her grew and deepened, the morbid tendency he had at first evinced to refer to his position disappeared. He had not indeed forgotten it—rather the recollection of what it was gave the key-note to his conduct—nor had he forgotten the bearing it had and would ever have upon his future, but for the present he chose to put the thought away. The future

lay in the shadow of the past, and he never ignored it ; but he had, so to speak, mentally rescued the present from the general darkness—it was a Goshen in which he had taken a temporary refuge ; acting, in so doing, with open eyes. For whatever might be the case with Eve, Verschoyle was not blind. He recognised his danger, and, recognising, freely accepted it, believing as he did that none was involved to her. He had been told, and he believed, that she was to marry Courtney—it was another of the facts which belonged to the future ; but even had it not been so, he would still not have sought to link her life with his own. This her influence, ranging itself unconsciously against herself, had already achieved, that whereas a month ago he would not have hesitated to wrest whatever he might from close-fisted life, life which had made him an outlaw and a pariah, now, even had he conceived it possible, he would have died sooner

than make her a sharer in his disgrace. Six months ago he had concealed the very existence of that disgrace from the woman he then, slightly and carelessly, loved; but now the unconscious influence of Eve's generous faith, her gentle yet fearless defiance of the world, had already borne fruit, and had called forth a corresponding unselfishness in him. He was no longer at war with all mankind. And what was, as yet, best in himself sided with the world against himself, and made—would have made her had she been to be won—Eve Carrington safe from any endeavour on his part to win her. If she would not take care of herself it would have been for him to take care of her. But—the reflection came in half bitterly, yet setting him free—such care was unnecessary; she had another guardian, and since she was to marry Sir Cyril, since the risk was only his own, he had a right to run it. And so it came that day after day found him at

Nortons, every hour of intercourse deepening the intimacy which had been of such sudden growth, and which was fostered by the peculiar circumstances of the case and situation.

Miss Duke, Eve's companion, had returned a few days after Mrs. Ross's departure, but she had been since then, for the most part, confined to her room by a tedious, though not dangerous, attack of rheumatism, so that she was rarely at hand to interrupt the *tête-à-tête* nature of their intercourse. It is true she had at first expressed some slight surprise at the frequency of the young man's visits; but she was a simple-minded woman, accustomed to defer to her ex-pupil in every respect, and entertaining an absolute confidence in her judgment, not altogether, so far at least as worldly wisdom was concerned, justified. For the rest, she was a dreamer, living in a world of literature and theory and speculation, upon whom

gossip, even if it reached her ears, made but little impression; and Verschoyle's history, if it had ever been known to her, had faded long ago from her memory.

On one point Gilbert proved obstinate. It was when, their acquaintance having already ripened into friendship, the girl had expressed a desire that he should meet other guests at her house. He had met her proposal with a decided refusal, which, whilst it did not surprise, disappointed and perplexed her. It was, perhaps, natural that they should take different views of the matter, regarding as they did the connection between them from such different standpoints : for whilst to Eve it was the beginning of a friendship, to Gilbert it was—he knew it—the brief opening chapter, soon to be finished and done with, of a passion. To her, looking at it as stretching onwards through the coming years, it seemed equally impossible and undesirable

to avoid or even to postpone for long a meeting between him and those others, whom, should such an alternative be forced upon her—as she hoped it would not—she was prepared to sacrifice to him and to what in all good faith she termed the sake of an injured man. To Gilbert, looking at their intercourse only in the light of a brief interlude, to be concluded, once for all, by her marriage with Courtney, if not before, a different view of the matter was natural.

‘No, let me come when you are alone,’ he said; ‘you have not found me backward to do so’—he laughed. ‘But trust me when I tell you that what you wish would do me no good, and you only harm.’

‘You will not?’ she said wistfully.

‘I wish you would not ask me. I know the world better than you do—thank God! won’t you let me judge?’

‘I must,’ she said, smiling. ‘I cannot

compel you to come if you are bent upon refusing.'

He hesitated, struggling with himself before he answered.

'I will come,' he said abruptly. 'You shall not say that I refused you anything. I will come.'

'No, no!' she cried eagerly. 'You know best—you may be right. At any rate, I would not for worlds have you come if you dislike it. It was only——' she broke off.

'Only that you wanted to show you were not ashamed of me,' he said softly. 'That was it, was it not? But you know you have every reason to be so—have I not told you so, always?'

She made no answer. If she had, it would have been to say that she would sooner be ashamed of her dead mother, of all that she had ever revered, ever held sacred or noble. But Eve seldom expressed her thoughts, and

when she spoke again it was on a different subject.

They were sitting under a great beech which formed one of an avenue stretching from the house upon a gentle grassy slope. At a little distance Dorothy, who had accompanied her brother that day, was engaged in conversation with Kit, with whom Miss Verschoyle had, in spite of the inequality of their ages, formed a friendship, fostered by Kit's peculiar precocity and knowledge of the world. Gilbert's colley, Ben, lay at his master's feet, and above their heads the breeze rustled the leaves, making a low whispering.

Their talk had wandered off to the first occasion upon which they had met. It was, perhaps, natural that hitherto all mention of that day had, as if by mutual tacit consent, been avoided. Patricia's name had never passed their lips. It was not, indeed, that she was forgotten. To Eve, at least, the

thought that Gilbert had loved her sister and that she had failed him, was continually, painfully present, though whether it was the first circumstance or the second that caused her so keen a regret she did not know, neither did she ask herself. Instinctively, however, she had shunned all mention of her name.

To-day, however, for the first time, they had spoken of that meeting. It was Gilbert who had introduced the subject. He was moody this afternoon, but Eve had by this time learnt to expect him to be variable and she noticed nothing amiss. There had been a short silence, and when she spoke she had stooped to stroke the dog's smooth head, and her face was hidden.

'I was sorry once,' she said, under her breath, 'that I had asked you to come again.'

'Were you?' he asked, with a jar in his voice. 'My words, then, were fulfilled after all—even sooner than I expected.'

‘Your words?’ she lifted her head, glancing at him inquiringly. ‘What do you mean? Ah, I remember,’ smiling. ‘No, it was not that. But I remembered afterwards—after I had made you promise to come—about—about my sister, and I thought—I was afraid it might have been painful to you to come here again, and that I was wrong to have pressed it.’

He coloured under his dark skin, but it was from a sudden feeling of anger rather than from any other cause. The recollection of his brief connection with Mrs. Ross came, as it had come whenever it had recurred to his memory of late, as a jarring inharmonious note, bringing with it a sharp sense of shame. How impossible and remote, how unworthy, what he had called, even then half contemptuously, his love for her seemed now! He hated that Eve should even know of it; more still did he resent the implication contained in her words that Mrs. Ross could still

be anything to him ; the very idea seemed, in his present unreasonable irritation, an insult to them both—to Eve and to himself. He made no immediate answer, resisting the temptation to give vent to an angry retort, and she spoke again, bending once more over the dog.

‘It was the first time I saw you,’ she said.

‘It was not a favourable opportunity for the commencement of an acquaintance. I fear, from my own recollection of my conduct, that it was not calculated to produce an altogether agreeable impression.’

His tone was hard and jeering, but she was preoccupied and did not notice it, as she went on without considering the wisdom of her words, or remembering the construction which he might put upon them.

‘You had a right to be angry. I felt it even then ; but—yes, you were angry.’ She remembered his face of governed passion, and

involuntarily shrank a little. 'If you should ever look at me like that——' She broke off with a certain tremor in her voice.

By this time Verschoyle was at a white heat of anger, utterly unreasonable though it was. Mrs. Ross had certainly been right when she called his temper defective. The very reference to Patricia had, as has been said, roused him to wrath; and, whilst every word Eve had since uttered had added fuel to the flame, her final involuntary putting of herself in Patricia's place was more than he could bear.

'Excuse me, Miss Carrington,' he said; 'it would be impossible. You forget that Mrs. Ross had first jilted and then lied to me. Of the last I am sure you would be incapable; and the first,' smoothly, 'by the nature of the case, you will never be in a position to do.'

The scorching colour rushed to the girl's face, up to her very brow. Never since her

second meeting with him, on the occasion of their drive to Mace, had she heard the tone in Gilbert's voice, sneering, almost insulting, which was there now. It was as if her very reference, innocent as it had been, to the past had sufficed to bring back his worst self, lately exorcised. She was absolutely silent. A leaf, dead before its time, fluttered slowly down from a branch overhead and lay, like a golden coin, on her white dress ; and the colley woke and snapped lazily at a fly. Otherwise all was still. Perhaps half a minute passed before he spoke again.

‘Forgive me,’ he said in a low bitter tone ; ‘I have so long been treated like a scoundrel that I forget at times that I am a gentleman.’

Still she did not answer. He stooped and took the hand which lay on the dog's black head.

‘Miss Carrington,’ he urged ; ‘Eve—forgive me.’

‘Yes,’ she said. She did not raise her eyes

—they were full of tears—but her fingers closed for a moment on his. It was the misfortune of the girl's life that all that was wrong, all that was blameworthy in him she laid not to his own account, but to that of the world which had made him what he was, feeling only at each token of it a deeper compassion. Even his faults seemed to her to cry for atonement instead of blame—wounds that he had sustained in the battle of life.

* * * * *

Half an hour later they were in the hall waiting till the dogcart should be brought round in which Gilbert and his sister had driven over. What had passed between them out of doors had been left behind; yet its shadow, as such shadows do, still lay upon them both, giving them an unusual sense of constraint as they talked of trivial and indifferent matters.

Gilbert was leaning against the stone frame-

work of the window, the sun rusting his crisp black hair as he stood, his face in shadow, looking down at Eve, who sat absently playing with a spray of heliotrope. He was struggling with a desire to ask her forgiveness once more, to gain her assurance before he went that all was as it had been between them; yet some instinct warned him that such explanations were best avoided, such words safest unsaid. He roused himself and spoke.

‘Your favourite flower, is it not?’ he said, stooping to touch the blossom she held. ‘The second time we met—when I drove you to Mace—I remember that you wore it.’

She did not answer at once. She was thinking how much had passed since that chance meeting, how long ago it seemed.

‘If I had not met you that day——’ she said slowly, and then paused.

‘You would certainly have been late for

dinner,' he finished with a half-laugh. 'Was that what you were going to say?'

She was silent, vaguely hurt. Perhaps he guessed it. He sighed impatiently, glancing out of the window with something not unlike a hope that the dogcart might be in sight. He was not commonly in haste to go, but to-day he was indistinctly conscious that he stood on dangerous ground. The scene that had passed between them had shaken their ordinary footing, and he had a sense that the part he had to play was becoming too difficult. Deliverance, however, was not yet at hand, and he turned to her again.

'We will not begin to reckon up the gains and the losses resulting from that meeting,' he said gently, though his tone was still jesting. 'It would be too difficult a calculation, and the gains, I fear, all on one side.'

Again there was a silence, upon which the children's voices broke.

‘And this is Sir Reginald Carrington,’ Kit was announcing in the voice of a showman. He was displaying the pictures, mostly of defunct Carringtons, which adorned the hall, to Dorothy Verschoyle, and had now paused below a portrait of particularly unprepossessing appearance: ‘This is Sir Reginald Carrington. He was a bad, wicked man, who killed his own brother; and he would have been killed himself, only he ran away before they could catch him, and never came back no more.’

Dorothy’s response came in a lower key, and the listeners did not catch the drift of it. It was, however, apparently unsatisfactory, for when Kit spoke again, his voice was raised in angry assertion. His small hand was lifted, and he was pointing up at the picture with a view of emphasizing his remarks.

‘God never forgives people who do wrong,’ he declared domineeringly, as if in defence of

some attribute of the Deity which had been profanely called in question.

‘It is wicked to say that,’ returned Dorothy, her quiet voice this time audible. ‘It is wicked to say that. It is not true. God does forgive people when they are sorry. It is only bad men who don’t.’

‘Well then, if He does forgive them He punishes them all the same,’ declared Kit triumphantly, shifting his ground. ‘I know He does. That is why Cain, and Sir Reginald Carrington too,’ again indicating the picture with a wave of his hand, ‘had to go about wandering all their lives. He may forgive people, but He punishes them all the same.’

Dorothy might perhaps have attempted a further remonstrance, but without waiting for a reply Kit dragged her off to inspect some fresh object of interest ; feeling, perhaps, that having, at least in his own opinion, made a

decided hit as well as shown a laudable knowledge of Biblical history, it was as well to rest upon his laurels and not to risk defeat by unwisely continuing the discussion.

Eve had been lending a half-attention to the argument, and she started when Gilbert spoke.

‘Do you endorse Kit’s theology, Miss Carrington?’ he asked. His tone was light and not without a suspicion of a scoff; yet she felt that something lay below the surface of his words, though what it was she did not understand.

‘Kit’s theology?’ she repeated questioningly.

‘Yes. Do you, too, hold the view—not an uncommon one, by the way—that retribution accompanies forgiveness?’

She paused, her brows a little drawn together as in thought, before she answered.

‘I do not know,’ she said at last. ‘God’s

ways are different from ours. Perhaps His punishments may be what we call rewards, and our rewards His punishments. I cannot tell.'

Gilbert moved restlessly. At times the very characteristics which attracted him in Eve from their unlikeness to all that he had known before, woke in him a sort of impatience, so far was she removed from the world in which he had ever lived and in which, even now, he was most at home. It was with a certain relief that he heard the wheels of the dogcart grind the gravel outside, and turned to take leave.





CHAPTER XII.

SIX o'clock had just struck from the church clock in the village below, its echoes reaching faintly to the top of the moor to which Eve, with her little nephew, had climbed. A sort of attachment had grown up between the two since they had been left in solitude, and Kit was by degrees allowing the distrust with which he regarded mankind in general to lessen in her favour. 'To believe every man to be guilty till he is proved to be innocent,' had been the maxim upon which his conduct had been for the most part based ; and perhaps, considering the nature of his experience, it was a not alto-

gether unwise one, though, like other people, he was liable at times to carry it too far. It was, indeed, only with the extremest caution that he was relaxing his practice in his aunt's favour. To-day, however, he had been pleased with her. She had not only left Marie, to her own indignation, behind, but had permitted Kit's—in his nurse's eyes—undesirable ally, Joe, the stable-boy, to carry up to the heath a basket of fruit, with which the children were at present regaling themselves at a little distance, whilst, a book on her knee, she watched the changing colours of the sky and hills from under the group of solitary fir-trees which crowned the summit.

There she was still sitting, when another figure ascended the narrow pathway by which they had mounted, and Gilbert Verschoyle greeted her. His first words savoured somewhat of reproach.

‘ You might have left word where you were

to be found,' he said. 'It is humiliating to be indebted to chance alone for the fact that I did not have my nine miles' ride in vain.'

'I did not expect you to-day,' she answered apologetically.

'Because it is so short a time since I was at Nortons last? I confess it, and I did not mean to come when I started; but the road I took led near here, and now that I am come I cannot regret it.'

'Why should you?' she returned; 'you are in time to see the sun go down.'

It was, in fact, already nearing the top of the opposite hill and sending its straight level rays across from the horizon, whilst behind them the eastern sky was still steel-blue. Gilbert had thrown himself down on the heather at her side, and they sat witnessing together what he called the whole of the transformation scene.

'Which does the managers the utmost

credit,' he observed approvingly. 'No, I retract—I confess I was flippant and deserve rebuke.'

Eve had lent him but a half-attention. It was only when, having at last reached their climax, the colours began to fade and the vividness of the effect to die away, that she spoke.

'It has been the best day of all the year,' she said, with a sigh.

'The best?' answered Verschoyle, looking not at the sky, but at the outline of her face defined against it. 'Let me give you something, then, in remembrance of it.'

He had taken out a small reliquary, carved in gold, and laid it in her hand.

'What! a relic?' she asked, smiling yet surprised.

'No, only its shrine. It is empty.'

'A relic of faith,' she said softly, lifting it and examining the elaborate tracery and delicate work. 'The most pathetic of all.'

‘And the best authenticated,’ added Verschoyle, with a half-laugh in which there was yet no mockery. ‘It is, however, a relic of something besides a lost faith. It has a special history of its own.’

‘Tell me,’ she said.

‘You would care to hear it? It is nothing much after all. It is only that it belongs to one of the happiest days of my life. There was nothing to make it so, or only physical causes—perhaps after all the best.’

‘The best?’ repeated Eve inquiringly.

‘I think so. No reason that you can give for being happy is so good that a hole cannot be picked in it—therefore it is safest to have none.’

‘Where was it?’ asked Eve, without heeding his digression.

‘In Spain. The sun was shining as only Spanish suns can; I had just recovered from a fever, and I was nineteen, abroad for the

vacation. Life, in spite of everything, was pleasant. Pleasant! it is a poor word for what I felt it then. I spent the entire day out of doors, lying in the sun, in absolute idleness and absolute enjoyment, though I had nothing to enjoy except life and youth. There *is* nothing, after all, like those two combined. What comes after may be better or worse, but one has always a past; it is the special privilege of youth alone to have none. Even if it were one to be proud of—I am not speaking of my own—I fancy I would rather have the sheet clean.’

‘With its possibilities untested?’ she said. She waited, her eyes wandering over the distant hills up which the mist was beginning to creep, then spoke again. ‘It is only death,’ she said, ‘that limits the possibilities of life.’

‘Is that your creed?’ He spoke with a touch of scepticism, yet he smiled. ‘I think I could name other limitations. Well, that day

has stood out ever since as what our pious friend the carver'—indicating the reliquary with a laugh—'would no doubt have called a foretaste of Paradise. How irrational we are!'

'And the reliquary?' asked Eve.

'It caught my eye as I was going home in the evening, and I bought it. It was after all an ominous purchase, was it not—an empty shrine?'

She was still looking at the little golden case, touching it softly as if it had indeed held something sacred.

'And the next day?' she asked.

'Was like all the other days. You can't imprison a rainbow. But I have always kept the reliquary. I grew afterwards to have a sort of superstition, and looked upon it in the light of a pledge that happiness is after all possible. You——' he paused—'have redeemed the pledge, so it is rightly and justly yours.'

They were silent. His thoughts had already quitted that distant day to occupy themselves with matters nearer home; but Eve was still thinking of what he had told her, of the picture he had drawn, and was remembering, with the dull, aching pain the thought always brought her, the wasted years that lay between that day and this. When, however, she at last spoke, it was upon a different subject.

‘You are always making me feel my ignorance,’ she said. ‘You have seen so much, and I have lived in such a narrow world. I——’

He interrupted her.

‘You are not going to tell me that, like your namesake, you long for the fruit of the tree of knowledge? You are unwise, believe me. Besides, what is the use? However much we learn, we end as we began. First, we know nothing and are content—like Ben,’ indicating the dog who lay beside him; ‘next, one learns a little and is wretched because one

does not know more ; then, after that, one learns, if one is wise, to be content again—like me—because one finds out that nothing can be known.’

‘Is that wisdom?’ she said. ‘Then I am not wise. I want to know more.’

‘Take Life for a teacher, then’—he was still only half in earnest—‘it will tell you all you want to know—perhaps more,’ he added in an undertone.

‘You recommend it? Tell me what it has taught you.’

‘God forbid!’ he said hastily.

‘And yet you recommend it to me?’

‘It is a wise teacher, and suits its lessons to the pupil. Yours—will be in a different language from mine.’

She looked at him wistfully, partly understanding his meaning.

‘Is there no interpreter?’ she asked, with a vague sense of pain.

‘None,’ he answered—his lightness had died away, leaving in its place a gravity not untouched with bitterness—‘none, at least, that we will invite to act as mediator.’

Again there was a short silence, and when he spoke again he had recovered his usual manner.

‘To return to the subject of your ignorance,’ he said. ‘Life’s pages are “fair and unwritten still”?’

She did not answer at once. When she did, she looked not at him, but before her at the fading sky.

‘No—not that,’ she said. ‘I have loved.’

A jealous pang shot through him, keen and sharp, accustomed as he was by this time to knowing that he loved her, and that his love was vain. His voice, however, was only a little smoother and colder as he replied.

‘Ah,’ he said, ‘I should not have asked the question. I apologize.’

‘Why not? I have wanted you to know. We are friends.’

‘Are we?’ he gave a short laugh.

‘I thought so,’ she answered in her soft voice, hurt and perplexed by his tone and manner.

‘Well, it is a word of many meanings,’ he answered, still half scoffing, ‘so perhaps you are right;’ then more gently, as he caught the troubled bewilderment of her face, ‘In whichever of them, however, you employ it, I am proud that you should apply the term to me. The world would be empty indeed without its friendships.’

‘Yes,’ she said dreamily, answering his words; ‘they are God’s best gifts to His creatures.’

‘No,’ he said.

She turned, startled, to look at him. As she did so, a deep, slow flush covered her face and mounted to her brow, but she did not

ask him what he meant. After a moment he went on.

‘And now, will you tell me what it was that you wished me to know?’

He did not doubt that she had been alluding to Cyril Courtney, but certainty must come sooner or later, perhaps the sooner the better, and he was not a man to shrink from it. Yet his hand, hidden in the heather, was clenched as he waited for her answer.

‘It seems so long ago,’ she said, ‘and yet it changed everything, for I did love Harry Courtney.’

‘*Harry* Courtney!’ he exclaimed involuntarily. He had, till then, forgotten that long-past story of which Dorothy had once given him the outline, and he drew his breath with a sharp sense of relief. At least it was not to his living rival that the tender vibrations of her voice belonged. ‘And he died?’ he said very low.

‘He died.’

‘Poor beggar!’ he said. Whatever the words might be, there was nothing light in his tone.

She turned her eyes upon him.

‘Is life such a good?’ she asked.

‘Life is what we make it. I am sorry from my soul for Courtney, who died. I am more sorry for—some, who live.’

She had been looking full at him as she spoke with her peculiar absent gaze—a gaze which seemed to look beyond the body into the soul; but as he answered, there suddenly sprang into it a more vivid personal feeling—something that was almost a question. Whether or not he read it he made no answer, and presently she continued.

‘It was so long ago. Five years are so long.’

‘And yet—through that eternity’—involuntary sarcasm was in his tone—‘you have remembered him?’

‘I remember him, but’—she paused, looking at him with a sort of dumb trouble in her eyes, which for the first time sought to find utterance, and which yet failed to discover the words in which to clothe its meaning—‘not as I once did. I am not unhappy.’

‘Thank God for that!’ he said rather huskily.

‘No,’ she answered slowly. ‘Faith to remember would have been a greater gift.’

‘Are you sure?’ he said.

His voice was not perfectly steady. He had turned away to pluck some long dead grasses that grew near, and was winding them round his fingers as he battled with himself. She would marry Cyril—of that he was no less convinced than before—whether she was engaged to him already, or whether, as was more likely, it was an understood and implied arrangement not yet definitely and irrevocably fixed. But that she did not yet love him he was

equally certain; and with that conviction came, for the first time, the temptation, fierce and sudden, to claim her, to attempt at least to win her. He might fail—it might be impossible; so far, he knew, she cared for him only out of her tender compassion and, as she had said, as a friend; but could he not change that compassion to something else? Why, at any rate, should he give her up tamely, without a struggle? What was it to him even if, as he did not believe, Courtney had her promise; what were promises and pledges to him who was at war with the world, and had a right to force out of its closed fingers what it had never been willing to give him; what fealty did *he* owe to its laws, its creeds, and its formulas of honour? None, and none would he pay. He had already turned to her, already the words were on his lips which should have decided both their destinies, when he paused. What was he doing—what was he going to do?

In his defiance of the world had he forgotten that, owing no loyalty to it, there was a deeper loyalty, a purer faith, which he owed to *her*, and which sealed his lips? Was she to be the innocent victim of his quarrel with fate? Had he not sworn to himself that, bad as he was, he would never be so base as to seek to drag her into his disgrace, to darken her life with the shadow which lay upon his own, and offer her a stained name; and was it possible that now, at the first provocation, the first gleam of a possibility of success, he was ready to break his vow? It was scarcely a minute—she had hardly had time to wonder at his silence before he turned to her again and spoke quietly, as if continuing the conversation where it had left off.

‘Believe me,’ he said, ‘forgetfulness is not infidelity. If it comes, receive it kindly.’

It was nearly seven o’clock when they turned homewards. Kit had run on before,

whilst they followed more slowly. Long afterwards they both remembered that hour ; the slow loitering descent through the sweet-scented pines, down the narrow path where two could scarcely walk abreast, over the slippery carpet of fir-needles ; the red-brown of the straight tree-stems ; the dim light struggling through, making a green dusk around them—all went to make up a picture that lived long in their memories.

Once Eve stumbled on the steep, slippery path, recovering her footing, however, the next moment.

‘ Give me your hand,’ said Gilbert, in a low voice. She placed it at once in his, and thus hand in hand they descended the hill. A silence had fallen upon them which neither broke till they emerged upon the open grassy ground, studded by patches of gorse, which lay at the bottom of the descent. Then Eve paused for a moment, drawing her hand out

of his, and giving a long sigh. It was as if, leaving the darkening woods, some spell had been broken, which removed, they returned to common, everyday life. Kit, running up hot and breathless, possessed by a new idea, completed the effect.

‘I may ride your horse?’ he cried eagerly, before he had reached them. ‘Jim won’t let me. I may ride him up to the house, mayn’t I?’

‘I think you had better not,’ returned Verschoyle. ‘Tatters’ temper is uncertain, and he might not like it.’

‘I don’t care—I want to ride him,’ cried the child. He was tired and cross. ‘Joe says I couldn’t keep on, but I could.’

‘I am afraid Joe is right,’ said Tatters’ master carelessly. ‘You must wait a bit before you ride Tatters, my lad.’

Eve had laid her hand on the child’s shoulder, bending to speak to him, but he wrenched himself away, beside himself with

anger and disappointment. He raised his small hand and shook it at Gilbert.

‘I hate you!’ he cried. ‘I hate you, and Marie says——’

Eve had bent forward again to interrupt him, speaking in a different voice from any he had heard from her before, and he paused half frightened. Gilbert, however, interposed.

‘Let him speak, Miss Carrington,’ he said quietly. ‘What does Marie say, my boy?’

‘She says you are no better than a *forçat*,’ said the child sullenly. He was quite ignorant of the meaning of the word, but shrewdly conjectured that it was a forcible form of abuse, in which, it may be observed, he knew his nurse to be an adept. The next moment he had turned and run quickly down the slope.

The blood had rushed to Eve’s face, and fading away as quickly, left her white.

‘You hear, Miss Carrington,’ said Gilbert.

If the blow had told, not race of it appeared in his voice, or in the face—smiling and unmoved, if a trifle hard—which he turned towards her. ‘You cannot at any rate complain that you have not had warnings sufficient. I myself, Marie, even Kit, to say nothing of others’—he glanced keenly at her—‘have united to caution you against me.’

She made no reply ; she would have found it impossible. The hot tears were forcing themselves to her eyes. Even as he spoke one fell on the white bare hands locked together before her. As Verschoyle saw it his tone changed to one of impatient pain.

‘For God’s sake don’t do that,’ he said ; ‘it is not worth it.’ He took the hand on which the drop had fallen. ‘What unlucky chance ever sent me across your path?’ He was speaking in low rough tones, not looking at her face, but at the hand he held. Suddenly she lifted her eyes, darkened and dilated, to his.

‘Why should you bear it?’ she asked passionately; ‘why——’

She broke off, but her eyes were still fixed upon him. He raised his own slowly, looking at her with a sort of surprise, which changed into something else as her meaning flashed upon him.

‘Why?’ he repeated vaguely; ‘why——’

‘Forgive me,’ she said quickly. ‘I did not mean to ask. I had no right—you know best.’

He made no reply. He had dropped her hand, and they were walking slowly on. In the garden they parted, sadly and gravely. The sun had gone down, the light was fading, and the mist rose thickly around them as he took his leave and turned away.



CHAPTER XIII.

THE weather had at last broken up, with not uncommon suddenness, after the long spell of sunshine and drought. The day after that on which Verschoyle and Eve had witnessed the sunset together from the moor, broke in clouds and storm, and since then rain had continued more or less incessantly.

Gilbert's visits, however, had not been intermitted on account of the unfavourable weather; there was, indeed, an additional inducement to him to come often in the fact that a term was approaching to the possibility of his continuing to do so. Patricia

had at last fixed a definite date for her return. She was expected back at Nortons early in September, and her former lover knew and recognised the fact of which Miss Carrington was more dimly conscious, namely, that with Mrs. Ross's return the ease and frequency of their intercourse must cease. It was as well—so he told himself—that the inevitable end should come soon; but not the less did he continue, even more recklessly than before, to make the most of what yet remained, postponing till afterwards the consideration of what should follow.

One afternoon—it was towards the end of the fourth week in August—he entered the drawing-room where Miss Duke and Eve were sitting together, and where tea had just been brought. The rain, which was coming down outside in torrents, was dripping from his hair and coat; and though Eve looked up with

a soft welcome in her face, her first words were of remonstance.

‘How wet you are!’ she said. ‘How could you come in such weather?’

He laughed as he answered her question with another.

‘Are you aware that it is three days since I was here last? Miss Duke, I am sure, has missed me.’

He had turned to the old lady, taking her hand with the courteous deference that he never failed to show her.

‘Yes, certainly we have missed you,’ she answered kindly—a gentle well-wisher of all mankind, she had a special liking for Mr. Verschoyle, even though she had begun of late to feel increased uneasiness at the length and number of his visits—‘but that is no reason that you should come so far in weather like this. Eve is quite right’—laying her hand upon his sleeve—‘you are wet through.’

‘That is not a serious matter,’ he replied. ‘I am more than repaid—since I have been missed.’

He was still addressing Miss Duke, but his eyes sought Eve’s, and as she met them she smiled.

‘Will you not at any rate go and get dry?’ she said. ‘There is a fire in the housekeeper’s room. Jones will show you the way.’

‘Would it be troubling you too much to ask *you* to show me the way?’ he asked, with a suspicion of audacity in his voice. ‘It is quite true—I am desperately wet, but still my courage is not equal to facing the housekeeper in her own domains unprotected. Won’t you come?’

She hesitated a moment, then, acquiescing, she rose and led the way through the long passages to the housekeeper’s room. Mr. Verschoye’s fears had been groundless, at least for the present; the room was empty,

though a fire burning on the hearth and an open work-box on the table indicated that it had been recently occupied. Eve knelt down and stirred the red coals into a blaze.

‘Rendal is so old,’ she observed, ‘she is always chilly, and has a fire almost all the year round. It is fortunate for you to-day. Come near and dry yourself.’

He bent down, laughing as he shook the rain from his hair and coat. He was, as she had seen at a glance, in his happiest mood; even then she felt, with a transitory thrill of pain, how rare such moods were with him, how quickly they passed and were succeeded by his habitual gravity and gloom. His dark eyes were lit, his whole manner was that of a man who has, for the present at least, thrown care to the winds, and is determined to accept what life offers without thought of future or past, save inasmuch as the memory of the one and the uncertainty of the other may serve to

enhance present enjoyment. Perhaps his long ride through rain and wind had something to do with it—he felt he had in some sort earned his reward.

Eve was sitting on the hearthrug, whilst he knelt over the fire. Ben, who had somehow forced his way in, in spite of his master's remonstrances, lay on the rug beside her, his smooth wet head on her knee, in absolute contentment.

‘You are ruining him, Miss Carrington,’ expostulated Verschoyle. ‘He used to be obedient, but I can do nothing with him now. He expects to get his own way in everything—it is bad for dogs as well as men.’

‘It is a choice of evils,’ returned Eve, stroking the dog’s sleek coat. ‘If indulgence is bad, contradiction is worse.’

‘Well, perhaps you are right,’ said Verschoyle, with a low laugh. ‘Ben fully agrees with you, at any rate. But it is a dangerous

theory—one is tempted to put your principles to the test.’

She looked at him, smiling ; the fire had given her a faint unusual flush, and shone in her blue eyes.

‘ Try me,’ she said. ‘ I will not contradict you.’

‘ What ! you promise blindly ? What rashness, Miss Carrington ! how do you know to what test I might not put you ? If, for instance——’ he paused a minute, grown suddenly grave—‘ if I asked you to discard what on your own showing is a token of something that no longer exists, of what is dead and gone, would you do it ?’

His eyes were fixed on the hand where Harry Courtney’s diamonds shone. He had spoken on an impulse as they caught his eye—they had often done so of late, wakening within him sudden jealousy of the dead man who—he knew it, however he might wil-

fully strive to blind himself to the fact—had been his only real rival in Eve Carrington's heart. She lifted her eyes to his with a sort of troubled inquiry.

‘It was there once,’ she said, faltering.

‘And now the ring is a “relic of faith,”’ he said, recalled at once to himself, and quoting the words she had used a few days before, with a slightly enigmatical expression. ‘Well, you may be right. At any rate, I meant nothing. I was only demonstrating to you the danger of rash promises.’

A short silence fell upon them. Outside the wind swept round a corner of the house, filling up the pause with a sound which had in it a curiously human note. Eve raised her head and listened intently.

‘Was it a cry?’ she asked.

‘No,’ said Gilbert reassuringly. ‘Nothing, at least, but the wind; and nobody minds how much it cries, poor thing. Don’t listen to it.’

‘Why not?’ she asked.

‘You might hear too much.’ He was smiling, yet half serious. ‘The presages that sounds are said to convey are symbolic, if nothing else. Listening long enough we shall be sure to hear death foretold—and it is the one prophecy which is certain to be fulfilled.’

She looked wistfully into the fire.

‘Has not life its prophets too?’ she asked.

‘The less is contained in the greater. Life always carries the germs of death.’

‘It is a gloomy creed,’ she said with a shiver.

‘Then forget it,’ he said hastily; ‘it is probably not true—for you.’

He changed the subject, exerting himself so successfully to efface any impression his words might have made that when, a little later, Mrs. Rendal returned to her room, Eve’s rare low laugh greeted her on the threshold. The door was ajar, and neither of them noticed the old woman, as she stood

for a moment watching them. She had a shrewd, kindly face, but as she looked at the group before her it was anxious and disturbed. She had known and loved the girl half her lifetime, and it seemed to her that she detected a new ring in her voice, that a new expression lay in the eyes that were even now lifted to Verschoyle's. Whatever might be Miss Duke's ignorance of his story, it was to Mrs. Rendal, no less than to the rest of the household, well known, and she was asking herself what but harm could come of an intimacy between such a man as he and her young mistress. A moment later Eve had seen her.

'Ah, Rendal,' she said. 'We have invaded your premises. This is Mr. Verschoyle—he has been drying himself at the fire.'

The old woman had advanced, and stood looking at the stranger.

'I remember Mr. Verschoyle,' she said,

‘though it is twenty years since I saw him—it was when I was living with Lady Courtney.’

Was it intentionally that she introduced the name? She had addressed Eve, but her eyes were on Gilbert, distrustful and scrutinizing. He had risen with ready courtesy, and had taken the old woman’s hand.

‘Then we are old acquaintances,’ he said, ‘though I am afraid I cannot expect you to remember me.’

‘Is he changed?’ said Eve, her eyes resting with unconscious pride on his dark, handsome face. ‘Would you have known him, Rendal? What was he like?’

‘I think I should have known him,’ she answered slowly. ‘He is changed, of course, but his eyes and hair are the same.’

He passed his hand over the short black waves.

‘Ah, there are grey hairs in it now, if you look close enough,’ he said with a smile.

‘ You must let me come and see you another day, Mrs. Rendal.’

He took her hand again before he followed Eve to the drawing-room. The housekeeper looked after them with a sigh.

‘ No good will come of it,’ she said, as she took up her work again. ‘ Yes, he looks just as he did then—he was always a bad-tempered boy.’

Meanwhile, unconscious of Mrs. Rendal’s disapproval, Eve and Verschoyle sat talking together, whilst Miss Duke, as was generally her custom, played the part of a listener, allowing her thoughts to wander away whilst her fingers were occupied with her soft white work, and her kind old eyes looked over from time to time at her companions. Perhaps, notwithstanding the weather without, it was one of the most sunshiny hours that they had yet passed. It was also, though of this they were happily

ignorant, the last of its kind which they were to know.

‘Have you told Mr. Verschoyle that your sister is to be here next week?’ asked Miss Duke, at a pause in the conversation. ‘You have not met dear Mrs. Ross yet, I believe?’ turning to Gilbert. ‘We are hoping to have her back in ten days at the latest.’

Eve glanced towards him with involuntary deprecation.

‘Yes—he knows,’ she said, answering Miss Duke’s question.

Gilbert had read the meaning of her embarrassment, half amused and yet resenting it; and as Miss Duke, always inclined to be absent, subsided once more into her own reflections, he rose abruptly and crossed over to the girl.

‘Miss Carrington,’ he said, very low, ‘you must retract.’

‘What?’ she asked, rather breathlessly.

He was smiling, yet she could see he was angry.

‘An assertion you have made, not once, but again and again, though not in words—an accusation you might surely have known me by this time too well to have brought against me. Is it possible that you can believe that your sister is anything to me?’

‘She is not?’ she asked, faltering.

‘Nothing—less than nothing,’ he answered, still with low, impatient vehemence. ‘It was no more than a passing fancy, and now I—I have forgotten it.’

He had almost forgotten more than his fancy for Patricia. He had almost forgotten himself and his hard-won, hard-kept resolutions, everything but Eve herself, as he stood over her looking at her downcast face, still with that anger born of love darkening his own.

‘And you,’ he went on with suppressed

passion, 'you supposed—you imagined for an instant that I still—that she could be anything to me now?'

'Forgive me,' she murmured.

'You are sorry?' he asked, bending eagerly down; 'you will promise——'

'General Cartwright.'

The door had been thrown open, and a visitor announced. They both turned, and Eve, rising, advanced to meet the new comer, a tall, soldierly old man with a thin, square face and iron-grey hair growing far back on his temples.

As Verschoyle heard his name, and, turning, saw him, he remembered, through all his annoyance at the unwelcome interruption, that the General had been one of his father's closest friends, and that he himself had, as a boy, been in the constant habit of frequenting his house on the most intimate terms. Neither, however, made any sign of recogni-

tion till Eve, her own greeting over, spoke Gilbert's name in introduction.

There was a pause. The General had glanced in his direction, looked him steadily over, and then, with a frigid bow, had turned away. The dark colour sprang to Verschoyle's face.

‘Yes, it is very wet, as you say’—General Cartwright had seated himself, and, totally ignoring the introduction which had taken place, was speaking to Eve in answer to some observation of hers on the weather which had preceded it—‘but I never stay indoors on account of rain. An old soldier, you know——’

Eve had looked from one to the other of the two men, and as she looked at once she understood the situation. She had been taken by surprise by General Cartwright's entrance, when her thoughts were otherwise engaged, and so had, for a minute, lost sight of the

bearings of the case ; but now, realizing them with sudden force, and brought for the first time face to face with the fact of Gilbert's position as regarded the world, the even current of her blood was stirred, and without a moment's hesitation she threw herself unwisely into the breach.

‘Do you not know Mr. Verschoyle?’ she said again, interrupting her visitor's flow of talk in a clear ringing voice which compelled an answer.

‘I do not,’ said the General. The meaning of his words and tone was unmistakable.

Eve's eyes lightened ; already she had turned to him ; in another moment the words would have been spoken which should have made her sentiments towards the two men plain, when Gilbert came quietly forward. He had been watching her, half touched, half impatient, with a full perception of her meaning and of her probable course of action, and now interposed.

‘I have trespassed too long on your patience, Miss Carrington,’ he said with the tone and manner of an absolute stranger who had called on business which was now concluded. ‘I need detain you no longer.’

He scarcely touched the hand she held out, and then, with a bow to Miss Duke, was gone.

‘An old soldier, you know,’ said the General, resuming the thread of his discourse as he settled himself in his chair and put down his hat on the floor, ‘is not particular about a few drops of rain, and——’

Eve never knew how the next few minutes passed. She had at once perceived Gilbert’s intention, and perceiving it she did not venture, even for his own sake, to disobey him; his look and tone had laid a command and a prohibition upon her which she dared not disregard. He had forbidden her, as plainly as if it had been in spoken words, to avow his friendship or to take up his cause, and hers

was the rare and absolute loyalty which would not disobey him even in his own service. Perhaps, however, he did not realize how hard a task he had laid upon her as she sat talking of indifferent matters, of the weather, of her sister's return, of Mrs. Cartwright who was ill; and all the time with only one image before her—Gilbert's face as she had seen it last, hard and cold; only one thought in her mind—how to make up to him! At last, taking a swift resolution, she rose.

‘You will excuse me one moment?’ she said with a smile. ‘There is something to which I must attend.’

She went quickly out, leaving her visitor to Miss Duke. General Cartwright, for his part, was puzzled and perplexed, and indistinctly conscious that there was something unusual about the atmosphere; but he was not a clever man nor a shrewd observer, and arriving at the conclusion, naturally drawn from Ver-

schoyle's manner, that his visit had been simply one of business, connected, perhaps, with some outlying parts of the Nortons estate which touched upon his own, he decided to make no reference to the young man's presence. He was himself sorry for what had occurred, and yet, remembering the past, and remembering too how Gilbert's offence had been treated by his father, he did not see how, as his father's friend, he could have acted otherwise. To condone in any way that which had been so heavily visited would have been a tacit condemnation of the course which had been pursued with regard to it, and such a condemnation, even had his own sentiments and views been less rigid than they were, he could never have brought himself to pass.

Eve, meanwhile, had gone out into the hall. A thick grey shawl lay on a chair, and wrapping it round her mechanically she opened the hall door and passed out. The

rain had intermitted, but an occasional heavy drop was blown violently in her face, and the wind swept round the house and whistled through the great trees.

She glanced rapidly down the approach. On the right, some hundred yards off, were the stables, to which, as she knew, Gilbert would have gone to seek his horse; to the left lay the road which he would have to traverse on his way home. Her resolution was taken. She moved quickly in the latter direction till, reaching the avenue where the trees shut out the house from view, she stood and waited, leaning against a chestnut, her breath coming quick and short.

It was only two or three minutes before the horse's hoofs drew near; another, and she had come forward, speaking his name.

‘Mr. Verschoyle.’

He started and pulled up his horse. She had advanced and now stood by his side, her

pale face raised, the dark, heavy hair on her forehead ruffled by the wind. But yet she did not speak. She had come to meet him rather from an overmastering necessity of seeing him once more, of making up to him in some way, she knew not how, for the insult he had received in her house, from an impulse with which she had not reasoned and had had no power to resist, than from any more deliberate plan; and now that she was close to him she had nothing to say.

Gilbert, for his part, was for a moment silenced by profound surprise.

‘Miss Carrington,’ he said, after that momentary pause. ‘What is it? What are you doing out here in the rain?’

The temporary lull was over—the rain was once more falling heavily, and was blown in thick driving gusts upon her bare head and in her face.

She made no answer. She had not heard

his question. Suddenly, as she stood there below, looking up into his face, dark and stern as it was, she knew—knew for the first time, but with a certainty as stunning as it was sudden—that she loved him. Five minutes ago when she had left the house—nay, one minute ago when she had come forward to meet him, he had still been the man she had been sorry for, the guest who had been insulted in her house. As she had waited for him under the dripping trees, with all her pulses beating and throbbing, she had still—strange as it may seem—been in ignorance of the real meaning of the bitter passion of resentment that had filled her, foreign as it was to the experiences of her nature, of the personal sense of indignant rebellion as if, nay, a thousand times more than if it had been she herself who had been subjected to the insult; but she would never be ignorant again. The veil had been roughly, violently

torn away; and as she stood, her head thrown back, the rain beating upon her face, her eyes wide open, dazed, confused, blinded as it were by the shock, she knew that she loved Gilbert Verschoye—loved him with a love so different, so absolutely unlike the tender unimpassioned affection she had borne Harry Courtney, that the latter had lent her no experience or clue by which to read aright the meaning and interpretation of that which was mastering her now.

There had been no long pause. Five seconds had scarcely elapsed before he spoke again, yet they had been long enough to set Eve Carrington in a world where she might look in vain for the old familiar landmarks, and where all things were become new.

‘You must not stay here,’ he said, growing surprise in his tone. ‘You must go in.’

Still she scarcely heard him. She had

turned away and laid her head against the horse's glossy neck, as if thus to hide what she felt might be written on her face.

He spoke again, more gently :

'Are you troubled about what has happened? There is no need. It had to come—I always knew it. It is well, perhaps, that it has come now.'

The words penetrated to her as through a mist, dimly. She was vaguely conscious of their meaning ; she remembered indistinctly to what they referred. Somebody had insulted her—him—what did it matter? Just now she could realize nothing save the one great overwhelming certainty borne in upon her, compared with which all else faded and paled into insignificance. She was not glad, not sorry—she was only supremely conscious of the fact. She was absolutely speechless. She had lifted her head, but stood with it turned away so that he could not see her face.

‘Good-bye,’ he said, speaking once again. His voice was low and a little stern, like that of a man who suffers, but is master of himself.

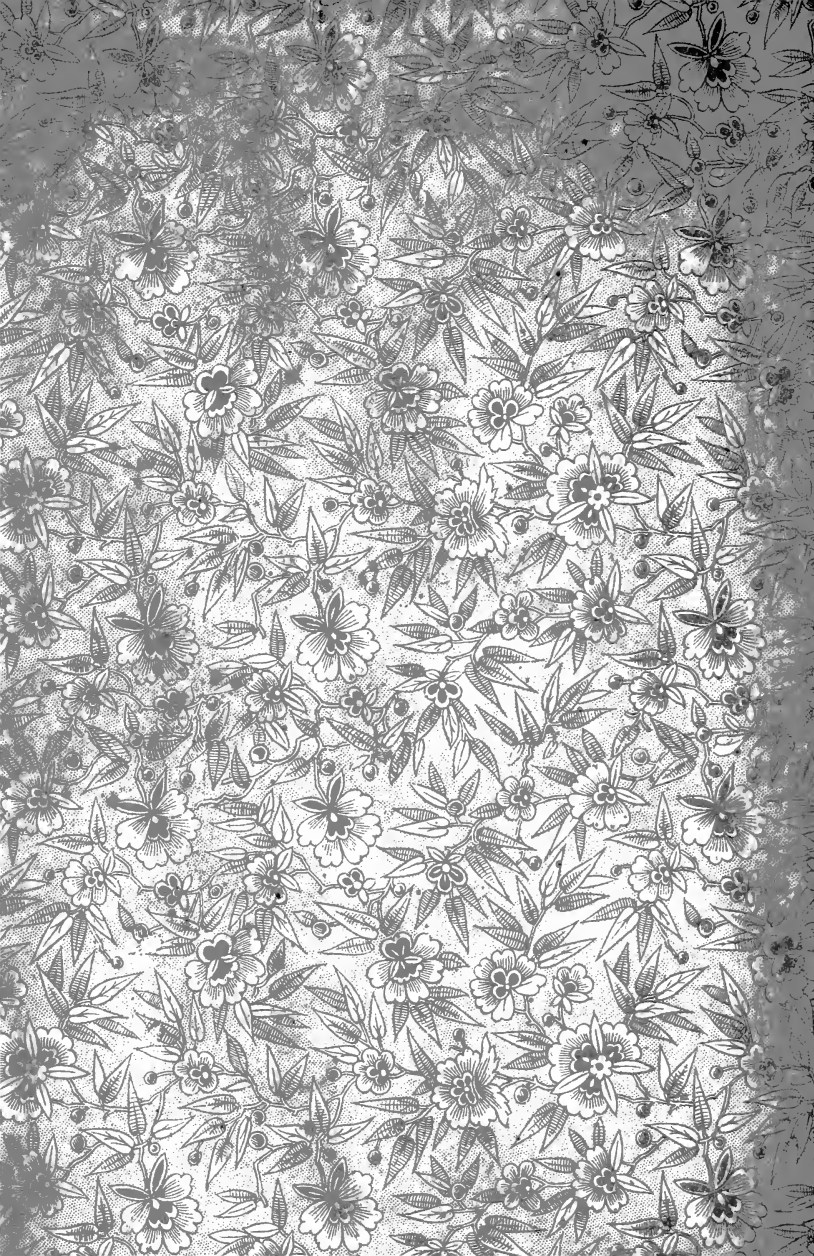
Slowly she turned and lifted her eyes to him as he sat above her, bending from the saddle, his face grave and severe and worn. For perhaps half a minute they looked into one another’s eyes. Suddenly as he looked his face changed, the brow contracted, and the firm mouth quivered. Again the longing, beaten down and trampled under foot before, had arisen with gathered force; again he was cursing his fate and almost rebelling against it. The impatient horse was chafing at the bit; her eyes had dropped; she was waiting, still and motionless, as she would have waited for ever only to be near him, asking nothing more; but when he spoke nature had once again been crushed down, and what he would have called honour had triumphed.

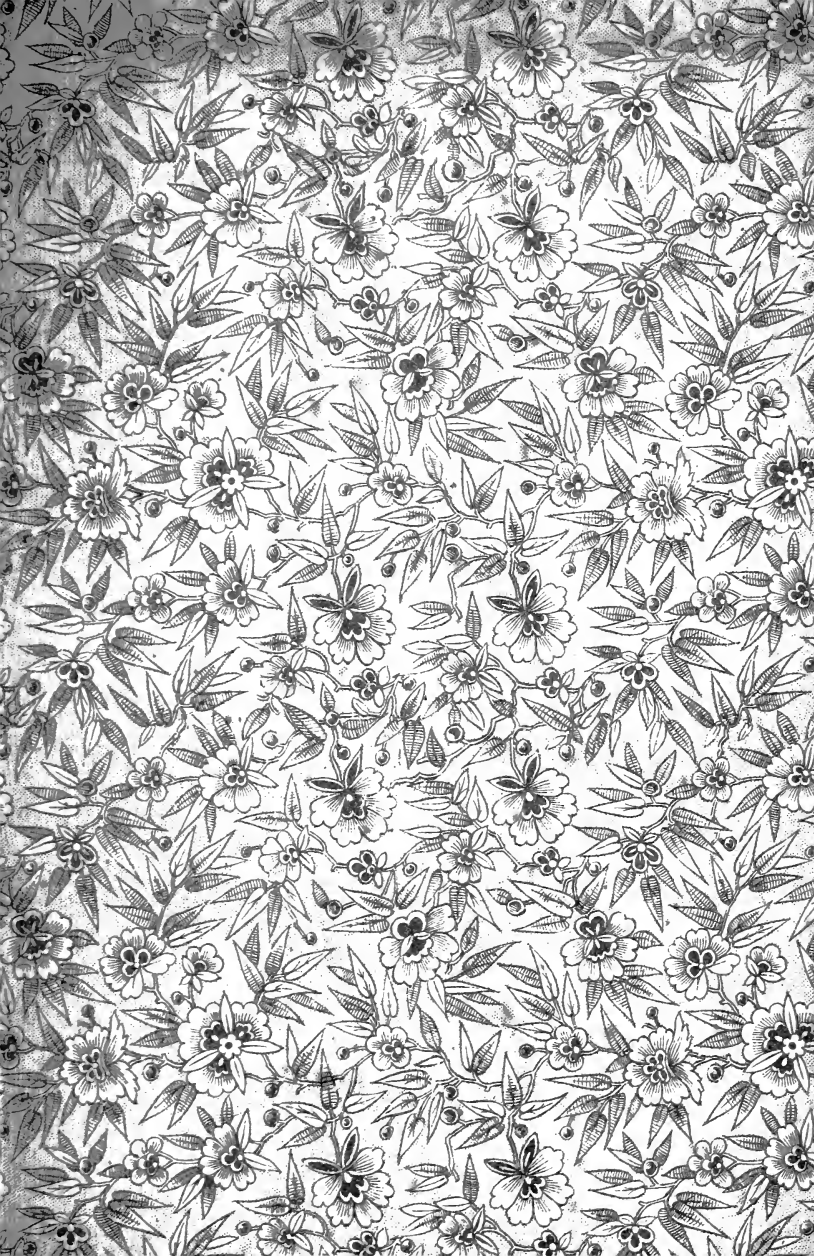
‘ Good-bye,’ he said.

For a moment his hand lay on her wet, dark hair, and then he was gone, and she stood alone in the wind and the rain under the swaying branches.

END OF VOL. I.







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